



Greater Attention Equals Greater Retention Enrollment Manager, July 5th, 2011

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Nearly 40 percent of students who entered baccalaureate degree programs this academic year will fail to complete their degrees within six years, if recent patterns continue. The implications of this trend are grave, both for our nation, which badly needs qualified workers ready to fill key jobs in emerging sectors, and for the non-retained students themselves. Current research underscores and enhances what we have long known: **greater attention to student-centered issues equals greater retention.**

“What we almost always find when we are retained by institutions with slipping retention is that the little things that make all the difference to students have slipped through the cracks,” says Dr. Joe Pace, a nationally-known specialist in student retention and Chairman of the Board, PX2 Youth and Higher Education, who also serves as program director, facilitator and speaker for The Pacific Institute in Seattle, WA. Retention requires a laser-like institutional focus, he emphasizes, and just a small lapse in attention to student needs and expectations can result in a critical slippage in students.

“Often, when we explore the root causes, we learn that an institutional self-study or other internal event has caused the institutional leadership to ‘take its eyes off the ball’ with regard to student-centered initiatives just long enough to negatively affect retention,” Pace notes. “Seldom is the college or university even aware of the lapse until it shows up in enrollment statistics.”

The economic impact on the institution can be critical, he notes.

Because replacing a student costs, on average, eight times what it costs to retain him or her, it behooves an institution to focus on retention of current students with the same intensity which it seeks to enroll new learners.

Bolstering student connectivity with faculty, staff and administrators pays significant enrollment dividends; Pace’s research shows that students persist at measurably higher rates when they make a direct, positive connection with an individual in each of these categories. He calls them “model mentors,” employees who are both caring and knowledgeable about the organization’s mission. Engagement with faculty and fellow students is particularly important, he points out. Further, it doesn’t matter the level of the administrative contact. In fact, often custodians in residence halls or cafeteria workers with whom a student enjoys consistent, caring contact can make the difference in the student being retained or transferring to another institution.

“Edupreneurs”—half educators, half entrepreneurs as Pace calls them, are employees who are both student-centered and have positive expectations of students, making a big difference in a school’s retention rate.

“Teachers need an intelligent heart-knowledge about their subject and the heart to know how to reach students,” he emphasizes. “The same is true of other departments.”

“These individuals with what we call ‘intelligent hearts’ become translators

for the institution,” Pace says. “We find that students at the highest risk of leaving are those who have not created these meaningful connections.”

Pace’s observations confirm our own experience that retention deserves the very highest levels of attention from vice presidents of enrollment and chief enrollment (admissions) officers, starting from the top down to faculty and staff. Presidents must embrace this model, setting the tone and priority for the entire institution.

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They have collaborated on six books, including “Presidential Perspectives” (2008), “President to President: Views on Technology in Higher Education” (2009) and “Economic Prosperity in the Next Decade” (2010). Both serve as consultants to college presidents and boards.