

Retention Challenges and Some Suggested Strategies

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The New Mexico State University Living the Vision Committee (hereafter referred to as the “LTV Committee”) compared student data in Fall 2008 with student data in Fall 2009. This information is available at <http://ltv.nmsu.edu/peercollege-comparison-r.html>. As shall be seen, New Mexico State University is facing some major challenges in terms of retention, but these challenges can be considered an opportunity to strengthen the university in terms of quality and quantity of students.

(*Note – Data from the College of Extended Learning was not available.)

Average ACT Composite Score for New, First-Time Freshmen (Fall 2008)

| College | Average ACT Composite Score |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Engineering | 22.7 |
| Arts and Sciences | 20.9 |
| Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences | 20.6 |
| Business | 20.6 |
| Education | 19.6 |
| Health and Social Services | 19.3 |

Average ACT Composite Score for New, First-Time Freshmen (Fall 2009)

| College | Average ACT Composite Score; increase or decrease from previous year is included |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Engineering | 22.0 (-.7) |
| Arts and Sciences | 20.5 (-.4) |
| Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences | 20.0 (-.6) |
| Business | 19.7 (-.9) |
| Education | 19.3 (-.3) |
| Health and Social Services | 19.1 (-.2) |

(The overall Las Cruces campus ACT composite score was 20.3.)

Note: All colleges experienced a decrease in average ACT composite scores for new, first-time freshmen from Fall 2008 to Fall 2009. The College of Business had the largest decrease while the College of Health and Social Services had the smallest decrease.

**Six-Year Graduation Rate of First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Undergraduate Students
(2007-2008*)**

| College | Entering Fall 2002 Cohort |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Business | 52% |
| Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences | 48% |
| Engineering | 46% |
| Education | 43% |
| Arts and Sciences | 41% |
| Health and Social Services | 37% |

*Graduation rates of students that began in the respective college and obtained a bachelor's degree in any college within the institution through Summer 2008

Note: Data for 2008-2009 was not included in the Fall 2009 Living the Vision Committee report.

One-Year Retention Rate of First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Undergraduate Students Who Returned to the Institution

(Fall 2008)

| College | Entered Fall 2007 and Returned in Fall 2008 |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Engineering | 79% |
| Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences | 78% |
| Education | 76% |
| Health and Social Services | 76% |
| Business | 75% |
| Arts and Sciences | 73% |

One-Year Retention Rate of First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Undergraduate Students Who Returned to the Institution

(Fall 2009)

| College | Entered Fall 2008 and Returned in Fall 2009; increase or decrease from previous year is included |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Education | 78.4% (+2.4%) |
| Engineering | 78.4% (-.6%) |
| Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences | 77.6% (-.4%) |
| Arts and Sciences | 76.4% (+3.4%) |
| Business | 75.5% (+.5%) |
| Health and Social Services | 69.3% (-6.7%) |

(The overall Las Cruces campus one-year retention rate was 75.9%.)

Note: Three colleges improved the retention rates of students who began in those particular colleges, but who switched to different colleges in the university. The other three colleges showed a decline in the retention rates for this category. The College of Arts and Sciences had the largest increase while the College of Health and Social Services had the largest decrease.

One-Year Retention Rate of First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Undergraduate Students Who Returned to the College

(Fall 2008)

| College | Entered Fall 2007 and Returned in Fall 2008 |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences | 68% |
| Engineering | 66% |
| Business | 60% |
| Education | 57% |
| Arts and Sciences | 56% |
| Health and Social Services | 50% |

One-Year Retention Rate of First-Time, Full-Time, Degree-Seeking Undergraduate Students Who Returned to the College

(Fall 2009)

| College | Entered Fall 2008 and Returned in Fall 2009; increase or decrease from previous year is included |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences | 66.5% (-1.5%) |
| Engineering | 65.8% (-.2%) |
| Education | 65.7% (+8.7%) |
| Business | 57.8% (-2.2%) |
| Arts and Sciences | 57.7% (+1.7%) |
| Health and Social Services | 47.0% (-3%) |

Note: Two colleges improved the retention rates of students who began in those particular colleges, but who switched to different colleges in the university. The other four colleges showed a decline in retention rates. The College of Education had the largest increase while the College of Health and Social Services had the largest decrease.

Percentage of Freshmen in Top 10% of High School Class

(Fall 2008)

| College | Freshmen in Top 10% of High School Class |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Engineering | 35% |
| Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences | 21% |
| Health and Social Services | 21% |
| Arts and Sciences | 18% |
| Education | 17% |
| Business | 14% |

Percentage of Freshmen in Top 10% of High School Class

(Fall 2009)

| College | Freshmen in Top 10% of High School Class (increase or decrease from previous year is included) |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Engineering | 20.7% (-14.3%) |
| Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences | 17.3% (-3.7%) |
| Health and Social Services | 15.7% (-5.3%) |
| Education | 12.6% (-4.4%) |
| Arts and Sciences | 14.1% (-3.9%) |
| Business | 10.8% (-3.2%) |

Note: All colleges experienced a decrease from Fall 2008 to Fall 2009 in the percentage of freshmen in the top ten percent of their high school class. The College of Engineering had the largest decrease while the College of Business had the smallest decrease.

These tables evoke several questions such as: Why are the overall retention rates so dismal? What causes students to drop out of their majors and enroll in majors offered by other colleges? Why do students drop out of the university? What can be done to improve student retention rates?

While a plethora of material is available to answer these questions, I examined four particular sources:

1. John P. Bear is the author of "College Student Retention" at Answers.com.
2. Veronica A. Lotkowski, Steven B. Robbins, and Richard J. Noeth addressed retention questions in an ACT policy report titled The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention.
3. Gerald H. Gaither edited Minority Retention: What Works?, a collection of six articles and one resource guide.
4. The fourth source is an ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report titled Understanding and Reducing College Student Departure by John M. Braxton, Amy S. Hirschy, and Shederick A. McClendon.

Rather than list a cavalcade of statistics contained in the various studies, the purpose of this report is to discuss successful retention strategies in three of these studies. (Note: Elements of success mentioned in the work by Braxton, et. al, are repeated in the other works mentioned above.)

Report #1 - "College Student Retention" – John P. Bear

Bear describes the "typically retained student" as one who intends to graduate, has major and career goals clearly in mind, participates in numerous campus activities, enjoys being a student, feels he or she fits in at school, and has a positive attitude toward the school, faculty, courses taken, and the academic and social life of college. Conversely, the fewer of these attributes a student has, then the greater his or her chances of withdrawal from college.

Bear also examines specific variables or factors affecting retention decisions among three different groups of students – traditional (18-to-23-year-olds who live on campus), minority (racial and ethnic), and nontraditional (commuter students, older students returning to school, etc.). When the following factors are viewed positively by students, they enhance retention. When they are viewed negatively, they decrease retention.

Background variables –

(Traditional students) – Parental support, parents' education, parents' income, educational goals, precollege academic success (high class rank, GPA, standardized test score), college prep curriculum, friends attending college

(Minority students) – Extended family support, church and community support, previous positive interracial/intercultural contact

(Nontraditional students) – Spousal support, employer support

Organizational factors –

(Traditional students) – Financial aid, orientation programs, rules and regulations, memberships in campus organizations, involvement in decision-making, housing policies, counseling, Financial Aid office, ease of registration, staff attitudes toward students

(Minority students) – Role models in staff and faculty, supportive environment, at least 20 percent minority enrollment, not viewing rules as oppressive

(Nontraditional students) – Parking, child care, campus safety, availability of services after hours, evening/weekend scheduling, cost per credit hour

Academic factors –

(Traditional students) – Courses offered, positive faculty interaction in class and out of class, advising, general skills programs (basic skills, study skills, math and English tutoring/help centers), campus resources (library, computer, athletic, student union), absenteeism, certainty of major, academic integration

(Minority students) – Warm classroom climate, faculty role models

(Nontraditional students) – Expectation for individual faculty member attention

Social factors –

(Traditional students) – Close friends on campus, peer culture, social involvement (service learning, Greek organizations), informal contact with faculty, identification with a group on campus, social integration

(Minority students) – Positive intercultural/interracial environment, at least 20 percent minority enrollment

Environmental factors –

(Traditional students) – Parental support, little opportunity to transfer, financial resources, significant other elsewhere, family responsibilities, getting married, job off campus more than 20 hours a week

(Minority students) – Availability of grants

Attitudes, intentions, and psychological processes –

(Traditional students) – Self-efficacy as a student, sense of self-development and confidence, internal locus of control, strategies of approach, motivation to study, need for achievement, satisfaction, practical value of one's education, stress, alienation, loyalty, sense of fitting in, intention to stay enrolled

(Minority students) – Self-validation

Report #2 - The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention

Veronica A. Lotkowski, Steven B. Robbins, and Richard J. Noeth

The ACT report policy report posits that the combination of a student's socioeconomic status, high school GPA, and ACT assessment scores with institutional commitment, academic goals, social support, academic self-confidence, and social involvement creates the strongest relationship to *college retention*. Meanwhile, the combination of ACT scores, high school GPA, and socioeconomic status with academic self-confidence, and achievement motivation creates the strongest relationship to *college GPA*.

The ACT report also addresses what it calls "special populations," saying social integration is especially important for students who are first-generation college attendees, have limited English proficiency, or are from a cultural or minority background. Faculty-student and peer-interaction programs such as mentoring, counseling, and advising have had positive effects on the retention of minority and female students, especially when faculty are representative of these special populations. By assigning first-year students to a big brother or big sister, such as an upperclassman or faculty member who provides academic support, peer tutoring, and instruction in study techniques, the student's commitment to his or her academic goals is positively influenced and his or her levels of persistence toward those goals increases. As the student's development and competence grow, so does his or her intent to remain in college.

Another study discussed in the ACT report looks at retention rates at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Chenoweth, 1999). These schools recruited faculty members to be advisors who meet with first-year students on academic probation, socialize with them, and help them address issues of organization. The faculty members counsel and monitor the students, meet weekly to review grades, and gain feedback on student progress. Even though NMSU is not an HBCU, some of these policies may want to be considered.

Report #3 - Minority Retention: What Works? – Gerald H. Gaither (editor)

Gaither's book includes several retention success stories, some of which shall be discussed here.

One of the authors, Alan Seidman, posits this theory of success:

Retention = Early Identification + (Early + Intensive + Continuous) Intervention

In other words, in order to have successful retention rates, a student in need of help must be identified as soon as possible (Early Identification), an intervention process must begin as soon as the problem has been identified (Early Intervention), the student must be closely monitored and must show mastery of the skill or social factor or the development of positive habits; he or she must also show that specific deficiencies in skill sets have been overcome (Intensive Intervention), and the intervention must continue until the desired change is effected (Continuous Intervention).

In the same book, Hunter R. Boylan, Barbara S. Bonham, and Gamba Nwachi Tafari proscribe several policies and practices to promote minority retention in developmental education: Teach students to cope with racism, provide mentoring programs, promote community involvement, and improve the environment for minority students.

A third article, written by Willis B. McLeod and Jon M. Young, discusses programs instituted at Fayetteville State University when McLeod returned as chancellor of that HBCU. As mentioned earlier, even though New Mexico State University is not an HBCU and McLeod's plans pertain to the university as a whole, some of his ideas may be worth considering. One of the often overlooked facts of life is that most students, especially freshmen, do not arrive at a university as fully developed adults; they are at different stages of intellectual, social, and emotional maturity. At the same time, each student possesses the potential to achieve intellectual competence, become self-directed and reasonable individuals, live responsibly as members of communities, and develop a sense of purpose for their lives. So as each student progresses from his or her freshman year to graduation, each student's needs for assistance and support will change as they progress.

To help freshmen on their way to success, McLeod instituted a Freshman Year Initiative at Fayetteville State University. This was a program that provided a network of support and motivation to help students clarify and achieve their academic and career goals. The most essential programs under the Freshman Year Initiative were the Freshman Seminar Program, Early Alert System, and Extension Grading Policy.

The Freshman Seminar Program is a two-semester course that provides a general introduction to the university and study skills. This helps link students with other resources and helps them integrate into the academic, social, and cultural life of the university. One of the most important aspects is the assignment of the course instructor as the first-year academic adviser for each student enrolled in the class. This arrangement ensures regular contact between students and their advisers through scheduled class meetings. This, in turn, makes most students feel comfortable in seeking help from their advisers outside of class.

So the Freshmen Seminar instructors are able to help each student find his or her way through the confusing, bureaucratic maze of the university. The instructors keep students updated on important upcoming events (university-wide cultural programs) and deadlines (preregistration, filing for financial aid). The instructors are able to help students select courses appropriate to their intended academic majors. Freshman Seminar course content is designed to help students make the transition to the university. Classes on study skills, note taking, test taking, and reading are designed to help students recognize the difference between university expectations and high school expectations. University policies and procedures are included. Calculation and significance of the GPA is discussed. The Freshman Seminar includes introducing students to various campus resources and offices. Counseling center staff members, the Financial Aid Office, Career Services, Library Services, and others help students understand available resources and clear up misunderstandings. To help facilitate the students' integration into the university, they are required to participate in some university-wide activities such as Convocation and are encouraged to participate in a variety of other programs and activities.

McLeod points out that many freshmen who ask for help soon discover it's too late to get the help they need. More problematic are the students who become so disengaged or discouraged that they do not ask for help. This is where the Freshman Year Initiative's preventative maintenance comes into play.

Students in the Freshman Year Initiative are required to attend at least 90 percent of their classes for 100- and 200-level courses. Students who fall below this attendance mark receive a WN (withdrawal due to nonattendance) grade for the class. The Freshman Seminar instructor receives the class absence information and could then warn students about the need to attend class regularly.

The Early Alert System (EAS) identifies students whose academic performance puts them at risk of not completing the semester. In the fourth week of each semester, faculty members identify students with academic difficulty. This information is then sent to Freshman Seminar instructors who can take necessary action.

McLeod posits that, when it comes to grading, students too often will not take advantage of resources that are available to help them. The Extension Grading Policy is a written contractual relationship between the student, the faculty member, and the academic support resource. A student who finishes all course requirements and at least 16 hours of academic support activities will receive an EX (Extension) grade if his or her final course average is below C. Since it's not calculated in the student's GPA, the EX protects the student from the negative impact of a D or F grade during his or her first year. The student earning the EX grade must repeat the course in the next regular semester after the EX is earned, at which time the final grade is calculated into the student's GPA. If the student does not re-enroll in the course at the required time, he or she will lose the benefit of the EX grade. This policy is intended to give students an incentive in using academic support resources and provides a reward (protection from a D or F grade) for those who use the resources but who do not earn a satisfactory final grade.

The strategies and policies outlined above are not all-inclusive. Rather, they are a sampling of what some universities or colleges have implemented in their attempts to improve student retention rates. New Mexico State University may want to consider some of these ideas, including:

1. Mandatory study hall and/or mandatory tutoring for students who fall below a certain GPA. The Athletics Department has mandatory study halls for athletes; why can't the mainstream population do the same for its students? Faculty members who oversee the study halls could count this as the service component of their jobs. These preventative measures may help students improve their academic performance, thus bolstering their confidence, thus leading to even more academic success. This upward spiral would have a positive effect on retention rates.
2. Mentors or big brothers/big sisters – Assign faculty members and/or upperclassmen to students whose academic performance is wavering or subpar. The individual faculty member or upperclassman could be the students' "go to" person, not only for academic help but as a conduit to other resources (Counseling Center, Library, financial management, etc.) Faculty members could count this as the service component of their jobs. Students could earn credit for helping the younger students.
3. Block registration – One reason for the success of the School of Nursing in the College of Health and Social Services is that students who are admitted to the school go through their final four semesters in the same classes at the same time as their peers. This helps build camaraderie and friendships through study groups and teamwork. This may help students in other academic disciplines as well.
4. Early Alert System and Extension Grading Policy (see previous page)
5. Community service projects (this will help give the students a feeling of belonging)

In conclusion, student retention is not only important for the student or the student's family. Student retention assures a continued flow of revenues into the institution through the payment of tuition. Also, for public institutions such as New Mexico State University, institutional support is based on the size of the student body. For these reasons, everyone in the university – from the top administrators and college deans to department heads, faculty, and staff – should be concerned about the retention challenges facing New Mexico State University and should work to be part of the solution to improve the overall retention rates.