

**Mitigating the Transfer Gap:  
A Study of Effective Recruitment and Retention Practices**

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### **Abstract**

The issues surrounding student transfers within higher education institutions are numerous and dependent largely upon the size and type of the institution. However, one of the most common reasons for student attrition and subsequent transfer is the lack of student support, services, and resources they find on campus. Most incoming college students expect a high level of involvement and engagement from their respective school, and institutions of every shape and size must heed this recent rise of transfer students with adaptations and expansions to their current support programs if they wish to preserve high retention and graduation levels as well as satisfy their student body. To be successful, schools must have engaged faculty, strong academic advising programs, and ample psychosocial resources to ensure continued student involvement and overall happiness as well as institutional success.

## **Introduction**

Decades ago, little was known about the reasons behind a student's decision to transfer schools. More recently, colleges and universities have realized that many students are "stopping out" or choosing to attend a different institution from where they started (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014), which can complicate retention and graduation rates.

Given the sheer number of school options, coupled with the fact that college choice incorporates so many factors that translate across economic, social, cultural, political, and other realms (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014; Vander Schee, 2013), it can be extremely overwhelming for students to try and make sense of it all once they begin at a particular institution. Many often need assistance in areas such as picking majors, selecting classes, or getting acquainted with student life or clubs. Despite varying reasons for transferring, an overwhelming number of transfer students claim they do not feel as supported or engaged as they expected, and thus need extra guidance and help to reach those desired involvement levels. In order to address these issues, schools must adjust their practices and resources accordingly in order to retain and support those otherwise lost students.

Considering that "more and more states are tying funding for institutions to retention and graduation rates" (College Board, 2011, p. 2), it is in every institution's best interest to take drastic action to actively provide a supportive and engaging environment for all students. In particular, specific ways in which schools could confront this problem would be to encourage increased levels of faculty involvement, boost academic advising and support, and circulate mental, emotional, and social resources to all incoming new students. Ultimately, it is the institution's "responsibility to establish inclusive campus climates" (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014, p. 325) to decrease student transfer trends and promote a positive educational environment.

## **Faculty Involvement**

Among the many ways to enhance student involvement on campus, an integral and major part of the solution should be relying on the faculty members. These respected individuals are a continuous institutional presence that a student encounters during their college career, and as such, could provide essential academic support and guidance. Faculty that are also mentors, organized and clear in their teaching methods, experts in their field, and willing to interact with students outside the classroom can have a profound effect on their students' persistence and involvement with the school.

Recently, a College Board study on student retention found that “students’ interactions with faculty during the first year of college can have a positive impact on persistence” (College Board, 2011, p. 9). Similarly, in a 2014 College Senior Survey administered by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, a strong majority of graduating seniors reported feeling satisfied with the contact they had with their faculty – over 85 percent in fact (HERI, 2014). Moreover, a majority of that percentage of students found that they were satisfied with their faculty as a mentor figure during their college career. “These results demonstrate the important role faculty members play not just in directing students’ academic learning, but also in providing emotional support and encouragement via mentoring” (HERI, 2014). Not only do faculty serve as mentors and role models on campus for seniors, but they also have been effective in aiding the retention rates among nontraditional students and students of color, both populations that are in need of additional support and engagement in order to persist (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). When faculty establish solid campus relationships with these types of students who are at-risk of transferring, the students are likely to persist, become more engaged on campus, and have a better overall experience, which is positively felt by the institution in their persistence, retention, and

graduation rates (College Board, 2011; Domonell, 2011; HERI, 2014; Hossler & Bontrager, 2014).

### **Academic Advising Assistance**

In addition to faculty members, academic advisors can have a positive impact on student retention. They have the ability to connect the student with their classes, peers, clubs and activities, and make other suggestions that will help decrease the likelihood of attrition with increased engagement. They can also have access to early alert systems, which analyze specific data and behavior patterns that can make a difference in identifying students at risk for departing early in their college career (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). Together, this information can better equip advisors with the tools and suggestions they need in order to help encourage and support at-risk students.

Specifically, one university approached the idea of reducing transfers through establishing risk levels in which to place all incoming students. Eastern Connecticut State University used logistic regression models to identify certain variables that typically led to attrition and placed students into TACs, or targeted advising cohorts, based on this information (Free, n.d.). Their overall objective was designed to utilize specific resources in ways that would improve retention among their student population. Because they realized that most of their transfers were actually doing better than expected academically, they needed to reevaluate the reasons for students leaving their school. What they came up with was a method of organizing their student body into specific quintiles (TACs) that categorized students based on academic performance (e.g. evaluation of midterm grades, attendance rate, etc.) and attrition factors such as Pell eligibility or minority status. Their plan directed the appropriate resources and advising support where and when needed, and is likely to have a positive impact on retention and

graduation (Free, n.d.). By “closely examining the pathways of their own students, institutions may also gain a better understanding of them and design support programs that fit those students’ needs” (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014, p. 262). Schools that make a sincere effort to analyze current trends and data regarding their student population are clearly better equipped to deal with possible transfer students who are at-risk of attrition and can intervene at an earlier date, thus likely resulting in higher retention rates.

### **Promotion of Psychosocial Health**

Finally, when looking at factors that positively affect student engagement and persistence, having ample psychosocial resources available can make a lasting impression. For example, studies have demonstrated that having strong social ties to other students on campus can aid in a student’s decision to persist at that particular institution (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). A student’s perception of their ability to connect with others on campus can be a crucial part of their decision to stay or leave. The act of joining clubs and activities or choosing to participate in group projects or other campus organizations and events can provide a greater degree of social integration for at-risk students, thus reducing the risk of transfer. In this way, “social integration positively influences subsequent institutional commitment, which in turn positively influences student persistence” (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014, p. 302).

Moreover, institutions that make mental and emotional health services available and known to their students can bear positive effects on student retention. In the 2014 College Senior Survey, it is noted that “institutions have increased the availability of counseling staff and resources in response to growing student mental health needs” (HERI, 2014). However, despite the fact that many campuses have these services, not all students are taking advantage of them. In this sense, “college campuses will be challenged to address both increasing student demand for

counseling services as well as any disparities that may arise in students' accessing and using such services" (HERI, 2014). Having a safe and confidential space for open dialogue can truly make a difference in a student's ability to persist and succeed. Student emotional health is becoming a widely circulated issue, and schools that fully address this problem will likely increase their retention and provide students with the services they need to be happy and supported – mentally, emotionally, and socially.

By recognizing behavioral patterns of social disintegration early on, faculty, staff, or administrators should be able to actively assist students in finding help or offering suggestions. When a student feels as though their welfare has been acknowledged by institutional members, they will likely have a stronger tie to the school and will be more likely to not transfer (HERI, 2014; Hossler & Bontrager, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Today there are more colleges and universities to choose from than there were decades ago. Because of this, students can pursue multiple avenues toward their education and have innumerable opportunities. That being said, some students find the transition into college life overwhelming and can become lost in the shuffle without the dedicated support staff, faculty, and programs they require to succeed (College Board, 2011; HERI, 2014; Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). It will therefore be essential for all schools to reevaluate how they retain their student body as more students are transferring than ever before. "The more students perceive that their institution is committed to the welfare of its students, the greater their degree of subsequent commitment to that institution" (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014, p. 256). Students naturally feel happier and are more likely to persist when their home institution demonstrates a true respect and commitment toward their general academic, social, and mental well-being. Although each

institution will need to approach their retention issues according to their individual missions, goals, and student population, strong and consistent efforts toward the support, engagement, and health of an institution's student body positively translates into more successful students, higher retention and graduation rates, and overall institutional effectiveness.



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