

*“Not a few experts in the field of higher education have arrived at fairly definite conclusions concerning the proportion of undergraduates who should not be in college at all for various reasons. These same experts, of course, do not agree precisely in the percent of misfits who have already been admitted to college but there is an unmistakable unanimity of opinion that there are altogether too many.”*

Andrew Hamilton MacPhail, *The Intelligence of College Students; A Study of Intelligence as a Factor in the Selection, Retention and Guidance of College Students*, 1924

## COLLEGE RETENTION FOR SMARTIES

### INTRODUCTION

“Misfit” may sound harsh, but when one thinks of the students and colleges alluded to above as miss-fits, this quote rings true nearly 85 years later. Hardwick~Day’s core business is advising private colleges and universities on enrollment optimization—how to land the most talented, most diverse, and right-sized freshman class. But what happens to that class year after year is also our concern. Intertwined with the variables above are many more that affect whether they persist to graduation. Are they the best fit with your institution, does your institution match their realm of possibility and aspiration, do they have the motivation to graduate? In our interviews we’ve heard from enrollment gurus who say retention is all at the front end (who you recruit, and the service and delivery follow through).

It also costs less to retain a current student than to recruit a new one. At least, that’s conventional wisdom, though it might not be true at large state institutions. Will improved retention also lead to higher net tuition revenue—particularly in the current pricing environment? We’ve often heard, “If we could just increase our retention by one percent a year for five years, it would lessen the pressure on our admissions staff and allow them to be more selective, which would give us a better profile, and...better retention”. Well, the truth is, this depends on *who* stays and who goes, the net migration out *and* in, and the aid packages of the students who remain. These are research questions Hardwick~Day is pursuing in depth—stay tuned.

Yes, we believe that strong retention reflects a match between institutional intent and student interest and expectations, a coherent academic concept and delivery, and is essential to the organic development of an institution’s educational success and reputation.

Retention is *the* topic about which our clients most frequently ask our advice. In response, we have created a process in which we help institutions to pull together and then parse all the available data that help explain a particular school’s success or failure with its students. We analyze some 150 variables—a level of detail that most colleges

don't yet have, but which can be built over a period of years if your college or university is intentional about it.

## **WHY THIS PAPER?**

Given what most of us *think* we know about retention, we at Hardwick~Day see many variations emerge from college to college as we perform retention analyses. For instance, at one tiny Midwestern college, we found that students from the lowest academic quintile retained nearly as well as students in the top quintile if they went on to achieve a GPA of 3.0 or better. The college obviously has an environment in which struggling students can succeed. However, the college had been overlooking students in the second-lowest quintile, who retained at a 20 percent lower rate than those in the bottom quintile. The analysis revealed an opportunity for the college to expand what it was already doing well, in theory increasing retention with only a marginal increase in expenditure.

As one of the retention experts cited later in this paper says, “Every student should be the unit of analysis.” For Hardwick~Day, each college is our unit of analysis. In order to set our analyses in context, we decided to read up on retention and talk to some experts. We offer this brief paper to you, our clients and friends, in the hope that it will save you some reading and illuminate your path a bit toward solutions for your own institution. What follows is a look at retention statistics, a summary of what the (vast) literature says works, an examination of the (paltry) rigorous research, and finally, words of wisdom from experienced enrollment people from three private colleges.

## **RETENTION PLUS PERSISTENCE, THE EDGE FOR PRIVATES**

As John Braxton notes in his introduction to *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle* (2000), “The national rate of student departure from colleges and universities has remained constant at 45 percent for over 100 years...More perplexing is an average first-year departure rate of eight percent at highly selective colleges and universities.”

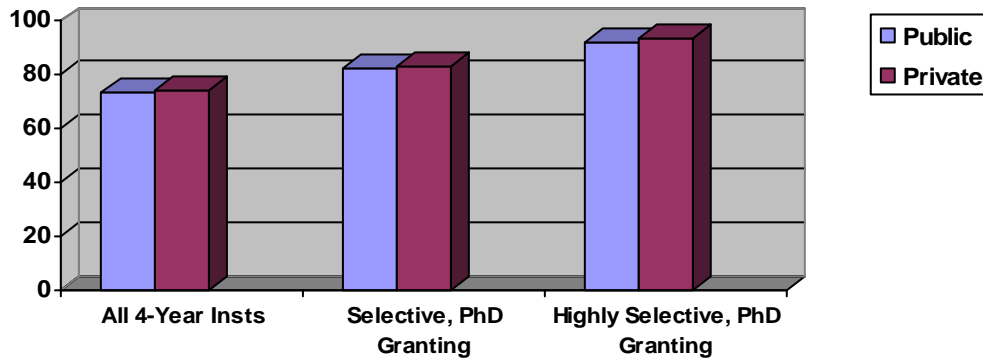
Researchers focus on first- to second-year rates because, according to the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange, over half of all students who leave do so before their second year. However, there is that inconvenient little “rule of halves” for *attrition*—if your first-to-second-year attrition rate is 40 percent, for example, you will lose 20 percent of those before year three and another 10 percent in fourth year. Habley and McClanahan put it nicely in *What Works in Student Retention: Four-Year Private Colleges* (ACT, 2004): “...first to second year survival is simply the first benchmark in a continuous process that leads to degree completion”

Retention rates are not much different for private and public institutions. (See chart below.) Comparing *all* four-year institutions at *all* selectivity levels, publics have a 73.4 percent first-to-second-year retention rate while privates retain at 73.9 percent. (Numbers are taken from the ACT Institutional Data File, 2007. ACT measures selectivity by ACT

and SAT scores and high school class rank. It does not take percentage of admits into account.)

But what if we slice through the data a bit? There are not enough selective or highly-selective public institutions to make meaningful comparisons except among the doctoral-granting institutions, where selective publics have an 82.4 percent retention rate and privates have 83.5 percent. The rate for highly-selective, doctoral-granting public universities is 92.2, as compared to 93.9 for the private institutions.

**First- to Second-Year Retention Rate by Type of Institution and Selectivity**



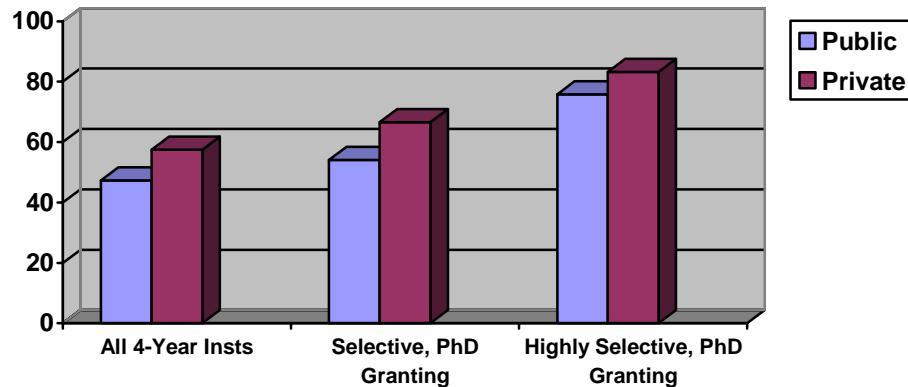
However, if we look at persistence to degree (five years for a BA/BS), the privates outdo the publics by wide margins (See chart on next page). Again, comparing all four-year institutions of all selectivity levels, publics graduate 47 percent while privates graduate 57.5 percent.

Comparing selective, doctoral-granting institutions, publics graduate 54 percent of their student in five years while private universities move 66.5 percent out the door. Public, highly selective doctoral-granting universities see 76 percent of their students graduate, while the privates graduate 83 percent of their charges.

ACT has been collecting this data from schools since 1983 and notes that the 2007 data are “remarkably similar to results of previous years.”

There is certainly room for improvement in first-to-second-year retention among all institutions, but for private institutions it would be even more meaningful for everything from mission, to profile, to (maybe) net revenue because they do a better job moving those sophomores through to graduation.

### Persistence to Degree by Type of Institution and Selectivity



### WHAT'S BELIEVED TO WORK: SUMMARY OF RETENTION STRATEGIES

There are many ways of organizing and labeling retention strategies. The ACT report referenced above compiled 82 strategies from the 401 private four-year colleges it surveyed. The book *Keeping Students in Higher Education: Successful Practices & Strategies for Retention* by David Moxley (2001) provided the outline for this list of institutional conditions and strategies:

- 1) Institutional commitment— Leadership, leadership, leadership. Designate a high-level individual to coordinate a planning team that is deep and wide. Focus on where student and institutional characteristics intersect. Set short-and long-term goals for retention, progression and completion. Invest resources and provide rewards and incentives. Make a long-term commitment to implement, measure, analyze, and refine every year.
- 2) Institutionalized individual attention: Moxley is the author who proposes that the individual student should be the unit of analysis. However, institutions should organize and combine strategies to make them available for all. Serving students should be priority #1 from the classroom to the business office to the cafeteria. In general, students will give faculty a “pass” on poor behavior but not so for admin, clerical, or other staff.
- 3) Expectations—set ‘em high, for every student. Make sure student and faculty expectations match. Institute high-quality formal and informal advising as a concrete expression of high expectations.
- 4) Learning—Student success (defined by learning) must come before research or athletics. Actions that shape pedagogy, curriculum, and faculty and staff development should be priorities. “Pedagogies of engagement” include:
  - student-faculty interaction (one-to-one or via small classes),
  - cooperative or collaborative learning,

- groups focused on problem solving or an issue,
  - service learning,
  - continuous feedback,
  - supplemental instruction, and
  - learning communities (requiring groups of students to enroll together for two or more classes around a theme. Learning communities have a spillover effect. More time spent studying contributes to students' sense of mission, to pursuing additional learning opportunities, and to better learning due to multiple lenses. They also force the faculty to work together.)
- 5) Feedback—early warning systems, entry skills assessment, classroom assessment, and withdrawal surveys of students and parents. Assess and give feedback frequently and have students compile the results in a portfolio, which will serve the additional purpose of enriching their learning.
- 6) Support—Most effective when linked directly to what students need to learn—e.g.: tutoring to help a particular student get through a particular math class, rather than generally-available math tutoring.
- Academic (developmental education courses, tutoring, study groups, supplemental instruction);
  - Social (counseling, mentoring, student centers, co- or extra-curricular activities);
  - Financial (student jobs as well as financial aid and counseling).

On the last topic—money—Paulsen and St. John (2002) showed that changes in *tuition* had significant effects on retention of low-income students and virtually none on affluent ones: “A \$1,000 increase in tuition reduces the probability of persisting in college by 16 percent for poor students, 19 percent for working class students, 9 percent for middle-income students, and 3 percent for the wealthiest students.” Earlier studies by the General Accounting Office (1997) and Baker and Velez (1996) had similar findings examined student sensitivity to grants and work-study, which they found were beneficial to persistence while loans were not.

On the other hand, a recent study by Herzog (2008) suggests higher income students accrue a retention benefit from financial aid, unlike low-income students, net of first-year academic experience and type and amount of aid received. Conversely, retention of low-income freshmen is more likely due to academic performance compared to those from high-income backgrounds.

All the above factors and strategies aside, we must acknowledge that if we truly put individual student needs first, sometimes what is “for the best” is transferring to another school, stopping out for a year, or taking six years to graduate.

## RESEARCHING THE RESEARCH

In ACT's survey of 400 private colleges, the three most commonly *practiced* retention strategies (out of 82 choices) were:

- internships;
- tutoring programs; and
- recreation/intramurals.

Fraternities and sororities came in 4<sup>th</sup>.

The top five practices which respondents *believed* to make the *greatest contribution* to retention were:

- freshman seminar/university 101 for credit; and
- three advising interventions; then
- comprehensive learning centers/labs.

The top two practices which most distinguished institutions with *high* retention rates from *low* performers were:

- faculty mentoring; and
- writing centers/labs.

What's going on here? What really works? According to *College Student Retention: Formula for Student Success* (Seidman, 2005), retention is a thoroughly-researched topic. Or is it?

In *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle*, Braxton states that Vincent Tinto's interactionist theory (1982 & 1993) was "paradigmatic" to the extent that it stalled retention research through the 1990s. (Tinto published two books and seven journal articles on retention between 1975 and 1999.)

Here's an interesting bit of trivia for your next professional association opening gala: Tinto's theory was based on the sociological model of suicide and anthropological rituals of transition to adulthood.

In a nutshell, Tinto's theory held that the following factors influence a student's commitment: individual characteristics upon college entry, academic integration (how students measure up to an institution's standards, as measured by grades), normative integration (intellectual congruence), and social integration.

The greater the academic integration, the stronger would be a student's commitment to earning a degree. The greater the social integration, the stronger would be a student's commitment to his or her particular school. Also, a student would be more likely to graduate if he or she entered with high initial commitment.

This all sounds good and seems to make sense intuitively. Braxton and the other contributors to *Student Departure Puzzle* tested the viability of the academic piece of Tinto's theory and boiled out what held up under scrutiny. Here is their summary:

“Students enter college with various characteristics that affect their initial levels of commitment to the institutions in which they are enrolled. Their initial levels of commitment also affect their [subsequent] levels of commitment...to their institutions that form as a consequence of attendance. Their levels of subsequent institutional commitment are also positively influenced by their degree of integration into the social communities of the college or university. Moreover, the greater their degree of institutional commitment, the greater the likelihood of student persistence in college....These relationships are interconnected and occur in a logical, temporal sequence.”

Translation: It's all about students and colleges making commitments to each other. As in a marriage or business partnership or any other relationship, if the parties aren't a good match to start with and/or don't contribute the effort, commitment is unlikely to follow.

The social integration piece of Tinto's theory remains unproven. Braxton recommended building upon the empirically reliable foundation described above and adding economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological theoretical perspectives.

In *Reframing Persistence Research to Improve Academic Success* (St. John & Wilkerson, eds, 2006), the editors acknowledge *Student Departure Puzzle* as the latest theoretical base from which to continue retention research. The contributing authors contend that there is a large body of research but little that is high *quality*, and little *evaluative* research.

*Reframing*, which is part of Jossey-Bass' New Directions in Institutional Research series, includes a review of 100 retention studies from publications such as the *Journal of College Student Development*, *Journal of College Student Retention*, *Community College Review*, and *Journal of Higher Education*. They found only six studies that were highly rigorous, as defined by those which included most of the following attributes: statistically significant results or strong qualitative findings, large sample sizes, a control group, and detailed information about the program in question. There were an additional 10 studies deemed “moderately rigorous.”

Of the six highly rigorous studies, one examined a counseling program, one looked at a mentoring program, three studied learning communities, and one examined a transition (orientation) program. The conclusion? “Only in the area of transition programs did we find a reasonable number of studies that reported consistently strong connections between interventions and improved student persistence. Overall, our findings demonstrate that academe is without a core set of documents upon which administrators can rely when seeking retention models to employ at their own institutions.”

So there is evidence to support those 400 private college leaders who believed freshman seminar/university 101 was the most effective retention intervention.

Interestingly—as student-faculty interaction is a selling point frequently touted by private colleges—St. John and Wilkerson could find no highly rigorous studies and only one of moderate rigor on student-faculty interaction.

## **ADVICE FROM YOUR PEERS**

We decided to ask some seasoned enrollment professionals for their advice on what has worked for their institutions. Bob Massa, Vice President for Enrollment and College Relations at Dickinson College says, “An institution first must know itself, so leaders should begin there. Define the college and then define the ‘type’ of student who would benefit most. Look at the characteristics of those who graduate and try to mirror those characteristics in the admission decision.

“Ask applicants why they are applying to your institution. For example, if an applicant to Dickinson responded, ‘I want a small college where the faculty know me’ I would—all other things equal—NOT select that student over someone who said, ‘I have an intense interest in things international and I learn best when I can apply what I have learned to real world situations.’ The latter ‘gets’ what Dickinson is about on a sophisticated level and has invested enough time in the admissions process to understand why this college is a good fit for her.”

Regarding the first-year experience, Barbara Fritze, Vice President of Enrollment Management at Gettysburg College, says, “Conduct research with first-year students and parents assuring that you are meeting their expectations.” She also advises building strong partnerships with your faculty so that they are aware of each new class—their talents, challenges, and other characteristics worth being aware of in the classroom.

Vis-à-vis leadership, Fritze recommends creating opportunities via committee structure to explore and examine this topic every year. Bob Massa says, “I would suggest that admissions leaders be closely involved in an institution-wide retention task force—a group of leaders from academic and student affairs, the Institutional Research director and admissions—to evaluate attrition data and make recommendations to departments to implement strategies to impact retention.”

Jack Hullett retired from Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois after 39 years as a member of the psychology faculty, dean of students, dean of enrollment management, and vice president. Over time, he combined principals of adolescent psychology with findings from a data base he developed specifically with improved retention in mind.

He reinforces what others say: “Make certain that expectations and fit are consistent among the different spheres of influences that students experience in college, i.e. academic, extra-curricular, and residential.”

He goes on to add, “The purpose of an effective financial aid leveraging system is to produce conversion which requires the students to justify attendance to an institution for reasons other than financial aid. The best circumstance is one whereby the student thinks he or she could have gone elsewhere at less cost but the benefits of the choice of institution justify the expense.

“Studies attempting to understand retention suffer from this same dynamic in that students are asked to indicate their reasons for leaving *after* they have made the decision to leave and had time to rationalize/justify their decision. Therefore, it is imperative that an effective retention program develop a database that allows for preemptive and anticipatory action prior to the decision of a student to leave.

“These data would allow the institution to examine retention based not only on student variables (high school experience, geography, gender, ethnicity, etc.), but also on administrative variables (counselor, coach, alum, etc.), financial aid (too little or too much in the freshman year?), and program variables ranging from extra-curricular to residence hall, academic program, advisor, major, and so on. It’s important to note here that such information will later prove invaluable to the development program, but that is another story.

Hullett continues, “Many institutions love dealing with retention as a Student Affairs issue, but hesitate to get into the statistical analyses. However, I think it is self evident that it is best to deal with potentially at-risk students, either by removing them from that risk or by attending to potential problems before the student feels at risk.”

## **THE PLURAL OF ANECDOTE IS NOT DATA**

So—we've reviewed the literature and we see the common sense of matching student character, preparation, intent, and interest with institutional mission, ethos, and effective intentionality. We often hear successful chief enrollment officers say that the yield strategy starts with the first contact. These are the ones who also tend to say, “You recruit your retention.”

What would a college that was really on top of it all look like? What would the Chief Admissions Officer be doing?

Clearly, in the current environment, families face financial pressures colleges can't completely relieve, and students themselves bring a host of personal issues. But if you've got great advising, a positive residential life program, and an ethos of engagement, fulfillment of brand promise, and a combination of clarity, structure, and support for students—combined with a hit between student interest and institutional purpose, retention will be good.

Getting there is what requires management. Brand management. Prospect management. Academic administration. Student services and residential life. Management of communications with students and parents.

In our experience, there's an awful lot colleges can do to improve retention that is simple, inexpensive, and effective. To merely talk about improving retention is not helpful. To learn how you got to a place of poor retention is more constructive. For instance: Need to reinforce the sense of community on a residential campus in a rural community? Years ago, Roanoke College inaugurated Friday's on the Quad, where the food service serves a Friday early evening picnic for the entire campus—faculty, staff, their families, and students—with music provided by a wide variety of bands drawn from the region's rich music community. It's not rocket science.

If you've already got a sense of community, look deeper, make choices. One highly-selective national liberal arts college in the Midwest had a low graduation rate fueled by what turned out to be a not-so-mysterious and very predictable phenomenon. It recruited engaged and enterprising, iconoclastic students. And these students did what you'd expect: got engaged in community affairs, politics, research, and service. They would take incompletes, which the school made it easy to get, and they failed to complete their coursework because there was no concerted effort on the part of the faculty or academic administration to create that expectation for students. Once they figured that out, they addressed it and retention and graduation improved. Engagement and enterprise are not the antithesis of structure and high expectations.

Behind all of this lies the data management and analysis that teaches institutions what they need to know. Data and analysis is the liberation from institutional mythology which in our experience is almost always un-useful and most often just seriously wrong.

At a basic level (and this is where [Hardwick~Day can help](#)), you can develop understandings of where in the population retention falters and what factors seem to correlate most with the problem. This allows you to prioritize attention to groups of students, to examine more closely their experience and engagement with the college.

It bears repeating that every school is different and so, while it is probably worthwhile to read articles and attend workshops with titles like *Top Ten Retention Tips*, you must know your students by the numbers in order to “triage” them for retention interventions. You can attend all the retention workshops in the world, but you will find much of the story—and the answers—within your own institution and students. ([Read a detailed case study here.](#))

We hope this brief paper will contribute a bit to the collective wisdom of our clients—private colleges and universities. We hope it will assure you that you are doing all the right things. If you think we could help you to examine and focus on your school's retention issues, please give us a call. As always, we welcome your thoughts, questions, and suggestions on how Hardwick~Day can continue to assist private colleges and universities gain strategic competitive advantage in retention and enrollment in general.

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