

Underprepared Students and Small-Scale Program Implementation Are Key Inhibitors to Improving Student Retention

Higher education thought leaders point to early assessment and large-scale deployment as solutions to effectively combat student attrition

Hoboken, New Jersey (July 14, 2008)—Presentations, panel discussions, roundtables and poster sessions at EducationDynamics' *National Dialog on Student Retention Conference* in June revealed several underlying causes of student attrition that transcend all levels of higher education, from on-campus to online degree programs that serve full-time undergraduate or graduate students, or part-time adult learners. Overwhelmingly, underprepared students and small-scale program implementation are the primary obstacles to improving student retention, according to higher education experts who spoke at the conference.

Speaking to more than 150 postsecondary administrators, keynote speaker Dr. George Kuh, director of the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University, recommends a positive approach toward academic self-confidence among underprepared students. Institutions that tailor the early days of class to accentuate "what students know" as opposed to "what student's don't know" are experiencing remarkable success.

"Once students feel comfortable that they will succeed in college based upon what they know, faculty and counselors can move the student focus to what students don't know," says Dr. Kuh. "It is a positive solution that promotes faculty buy-in and involvement, rather than leaving faculty waiting for better students."

Retention-related initiatives are most effective early on in the relationship between an institution and its students, which underscores the importance of early warning systems. In his plenary session titled "Lifetime Value of a Student," Steve Isaac, CEO of EducationDynamics, explained that retention-related communications and activities are least costly if they address all students early and customize later. "In the first 30-45 days in the life of a student, institutions should track behavior against variables associated with attrition profiles," said Isaac.

While conference speakers credit institutions for knowing what it takes to engage and retain students, the challenge lies in large-scale implementation. When colleges identify tactics to encourage persistence, "we find things that work and we only do them with six dozen students," says Dr. Kuh. "We're shy about asking and requiring and cajoling students to participate."

Specifically, programs that draw students to take a personal interest in their education and their future work will keep students engaged. High-impact, low-cost recommendations to increase student engagement include the following:

1. **Learning Communities.** Designed to connect students with similar academic interests, learning communities encourage students to build friendships and create study networks. Student mentors and faculty participation further enhance student engagement.
2. **Service Learning.** Organized by advisors and student leaders, service learning integrates community service with academic curriculum to create experiential learning opportunities. This typically requires few resources (t-shirts, bag lunches, transportation) and is a great way for students to connect with one another and to the institution itself.

3. **Faculty Selection.** Colleges often use their best and brightest faculty in higher-level courses. However, using them in gateway courses and in first semester courses tends to have a greater impact. Institutions that use adjuncts to interact with first-term students should provide thorough training and proper motivation.
4. **Student Requirements.** Students are challenged to manage their time for required projects, so optional activities often fall by the wayside. If an institution really wants students to attend counseling, perform service learning or join a learning community, that activity should be deemed mandatory.

Video and PowerPoint presentations from Dr. George Kuh and Steve Isaac, among other *National Dialog on Student Retention Conference* speakers, can be viewed by visiting http://www.educationdynamics.com/retention_conference/conference_downloads.htm. Held June 2-3, 2008, the inaugural *National Dialog on Student Retention Conference* focused on cultivating a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding retention and the actionable steps institutions can implement to engage and retain students.

About EducationDynamics

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