

September 1st, 2011

Hybrid approach drives retention success

One university aims to boost its returning students with careful monitoring

Byline: ANGELA NAGINEY

Director of Retention, Cal Lutheran University

In 2007, when California Lutheran University (CLU) campus leaders noticed a drop in freshman return rates, they charged me with serving as CLU's retention champion. As the first director of retention, I felt a responsibility to develop a retention program that would uphold the university's commitment to inclusive inquiry.

Although CLU first used the "r" word on campus in 2007, I would argue that the university's retention efforts have been underway for decades, if not centuries. Part of a 500-year-old tradition of Lutheran education, CLU encourages critical inquiry from its entire population, including students, faculty, and staff. This culture fosters critical thinking and exploration.

With roughly 3,700 students enrolled at CLU – 2,200 undergraduate and 1,500 graduate – I recognized the need for a comprehensive retention program that would capture student needs and challenges across the entire campus to keep them all on the road to graduation.

Over the past five academic years, we raised CLU freshman retention rates from 78 percent to almost 83 percent. Throughout these years we learned that increased retention depends on motivation, perseverance, and a strategic plan with clear improvement goals. Our success is fueled by the following hybrid approach.

Multiple power sources

Although I lead CLU's retention efforts, retention must be addressed by a number of campus departments in order to generate significant results. For example, while the residential life team works to foster an inclusive on-campus community, the faculty develops academic programs that motivate students.

CLU's connected and collaborative community fosters feedback on specific students from a wide range of university constituents, including faculty, administrators, and staff. This regular, often informal input plays a major role in identifying and addressing at-risk students. It is my role to communicate with community members.

Centralized dashboard monitoring

Communication management has been a key driver of our success. As we created specific retention goals, we quickly understood that a successful retention program would require a variety of opportunities to identify, report, and address at-risk students, all of which should be available and centrally managed through a software management tool. We decided to employ Hobsons' Retain software, which allows us to:

- Solicit input on each individual student
- Automatically generate early alert information based on statistical data
- Create opportunities for those not traditionally involved in the student retention process (i.e., bursar's office, athletics, student life) to provide feedback
- Manage and monitor all information from one central system

Although I encourage faculty to use our formal alert system to flag potentially at-risk students, I continue to collect informal alerts. If a professor stops me in the hallway to share a student anecdote, I can add details of that conversation to the system.

I used to pore through my eMails and case notes to gain an overarching understanding of a particular student's history. Now, I simply search by name and can easily click through the records to refresh my memory regarding this student.

Regular tune-ups

Each semester we complete a number of exercises to identify potentially at-risk students. In addition to gathering continuous feedback from faculty and staff, I run quantitative analysis. I can proactively analyze the data to forecast attrition rates, identify trends, and pinpoint students who may need individualized attention.

Once we identify students as at-risk, proactive communication is an essential next step. This dialogue can be the first thing that impacts students' decisions to remain enrolled.

The ability to communicate immediately and frequently with these students is invaluable in keeping them on campus and ensuring that they have all the resources they need to stay enrolled. This makes all the difference in getting through to students before they make a final decision.

Plug in and recharge

We achieved positive results in our first year: Freshman retention rates rose from 76 to 81.5 percent. Rather than rest on our laurels, however, we examine our retention programs from all angles each year to improve them and add new programs. Our self-evaluation evolves each semester, but the following methods have proven successful:

- Survey non-retained students to see what issues affected their decision to drop out or not re-enroll
- Ask faculty for continuous feedback on the issues they believe affect students academically and socially
- Run focus groups with at-risk students to understand what issues most concern them

As the director of retention, I ensure that our retention efforts gather a holistic view of the entire CLU campus. Central management, along with outreach, keeps us on the road to success—one student at a time.

The screenshot shows the eSchool News website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, Publications, Resources, Events, Funding, Video, Help, My Profile, Advertise, and Subscribe. A search bar is located in the top right corner. Below the navigation bar, there are several featured articles with images and titles: "Social websites are latest sources for plagiarized material", "Wisconsin teacher retirements double after cuts to benefits and collective bargaining", "Hybrid approach drives retention success", and "Dissatisfied with school website, student builds app".

The main article, "Hybrid approach drives retention success", is dated September 1st, 2011, and is written by Angela Naginey. The article discusses how CLU's connected and collaborative community fosters feedback on specific students from a wide range of university constituents, including faculty, administrators, and staff. It highlights the role of identifying and addressing at-risk students through a centralized dashboard monitoring system. The article lists several key strategies:

- Solicit input on each individual student
- Automatically generate early alert information based on statistical data
- Create opportunities for those not traditionally involved in the student retention process (i.e., bursar's office, athletics, student life) to provide feedback
- Manage and monitor all information from one central system

The article concludes by stating that although the author encourages faculty to use a formal alert system, they continue to collect informal alerts and share student anecdotes through a software management tool. The author also mentions using e-mails and case notes to gain an overarching understanding of a particular student's history.

On the right side of the page, there are several promotional banners. One banner for "DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES?" promotes a "Flex your brain muscles with the Ultimate Problem Solver Challenge" and includes a "Start Solving" button. Another banner for "Get your FREE newsletter today!" offers education technology news and information each Monday with eSchool News This Week, featuring an email input field and a "Submit" button. A third banner for "Best Practices for Hosting, Support and Use of Moodle in K-12 Schools" is scheduled for Wednesday, Oct 5, 2011 at 2pm EDT. At the bottom right, there is a banner for "Get your FREE Information Kit" and a "Click for your FREE info kit >>" link, along with the Headsprout logo.