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## No Time to Waste

*Tools that support early intervention and better communication can improve poor student retention rates and support the business and educational missions of any learning institution.*

By: Eric Slack

The business of education is educating students. Losing students along the way is the definition of failing to meet the mission, and poor retention rates are damaging to an institution's reputation and economic bottom line. Ultimately, student success leads to retention and graduation, but ensuring students are on the right path to success isn't as easy as it sounds.

Providing students with access to higher education and the opportunity to succeed academically relies on data-driven decision-making. Modern technology can make a positive impact on annual student retention rates by identifying at-risk students earlier in their academic careers. If students struggle with courses or face financial difficulties, it can impact their long-term ability to complete their studies.

In the past, these risk factors were often not discovered until after a student was already on his or her way out the door. Now, CRM software can help educational institutions better anticipate who will need help and when. But these solutions are often expensive to purchase and/or difficult to create in-house. The conundrum colleges and universities face is to determine whether they have the capability to tackle the problem internally, or if the short-term cost of investing in a third party solution is worth the potential long-term gains.

### **Facing the facts**

One institution that realized it needed outside help is Fayetteville State University, a University of North Carolina constituent institution. It is already seeing significant retention improvement thanks to an all-out strategy to use data to inform decision-making.

Several years ago, Fayetteville State realized it wasn't doing enough to keep its retention rates in line with its peers. It had a 71 percent one-year retention rate, which was similar to peer institutions. However, a 17 percent four-year graduation rate and six-year 37 percent graduation rate was well below its peers and its own expectations.

Numerous problems combined to contribute to the situation. There was a significant disconnect between the academic and advisory departments and the financial aid and business offices. The university recognized it needed to do a better job of connecting the departments that monitored student performance with those that kept watch over financial and economic factors.

“We had also switched to a newer student information system and made advisement optional,” says Dr. John Brooks, dean of Fayetteville State’s University College. “That decision came about because we were listening to what our students and advisors were telling us. But a lot of students ended up taking the wrong courses or not working with their faculty advisors closely enough.”

The university realized its internal tools weren’t sufficiently up to the task, so it shopped around and eventually invested in a product by the technology solutions company Hobsons. Called Retain, the product provides the university’s staff with a Web-based portal equipped with early alert and student retention CRM technology. It includes e-communication tools, a centralized database and targeted communication plans that are designed to help recognize and connect with at-risk students long before they reach the point of no return.

“One of the first things we did when Retain went live was put together an advising survey, which we ran for several semesters,” Brooks says. “We learned that many students did not know who their advisor was, were not communicating with them and were frustrated with the advising process. The data we got from those surveys were part of the decision to return to mandatory advising in 2008. Following the return to mandatory advising, we ran another advising survey, and student satisfaction rates with advising increased dramatically. Advising satisfaction rates have remained in the 80 to 90 percent range.”

Results like those are a firm indication that Fayetteville State made the right move by using technology to address retention. Graduation rates are on the rise, and the university also saw a two percent increase in the fall-to-spring persistence rate for first-time freshmen and a drop of 10 percent in the number of students receiving a Did Not Finish course grade. This was thanks to the early warning system Retain provided. The university says it also improved early orientation communication, the transfer-student communication process, interdepartmental collaboration and incoming student registration because of the Retain tools at its disposal.

### **Just do it**

Selecting the right outside vendor to tackle these problems wasn’t an easy task, but Fayetteville State was attracted to Hobsons’ understanding that student success depends on engaging with students at the right time. The university felt that Hobsons’ tools would allow it to deliver the right message at the right time and could get the right people involved to help students be successful and matriculate to graduation.

Some colleges and universities might have the resources to address these concerns on their own. Brooks says Fayetteville State knew it couldn’t build the system itself, nor could it adapt its in-house student information system, called Banner, to become optimized for communicating with students. It was simply not designed to push information out to students, faculty or advisors and then collect information from those parties and leverage it in a way that would improve retention and graduation.

Whether or not outside help is required, the journey toward improved retention and graduation must begin with the installation of a culture that improves the institutional focus on student success. From there, a course can be charted that will help readily identify students who are having difficulty, far earlier than in years gone by. The technology is a tool that can keep students engaged, allowing the institution to track their progress and intervene based on real-time data.

Access to higher education is a key component of upward mobility in society, and colleges and universities need to do more to ensure that students succeed in their educational pursuits and do not become casualties. By investing in retention tools that can improve the student-advisor experience and tailor communication

plans and intervention strategies to the specific needs of different populations, higher education can help more students overcome obstacles and find their way to graduation day.