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# STRONG AND STEADY WINS THE RETENTION RACE

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*Director of Retention Angela Naginey has employed a “holistic” strategy in her retention initiative at Cal Lutheran University. Her plan includes partnerships across campus, early identification of at-risk students, and a continuous review process. All components are supported both with software, including Hobsons’ Retain, and with ongoing outreach efforts.*

Although California Lutheran University (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.

In 2007, when 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.

With roughly 3,700 students enrolled at CLU—2,200 undergraduate and 1,500 graduate—I recognized the need for a comprehensive program that would capture student needs and challenges across the entire campus to keep them all on the path 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. We owe our success in this “retention marathon” to the following principles:

## **Run with a Buddy**

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.

## **Maintain Flexibility**

As we created specific retention goals, we 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. These include:

- Soliciting input on each individual student
- Automatically generating early alert information based on statistical data
- Making opportunities for those not traditionally involved in the student retention process (i.e., bursar’s office, athletics, student life) to provide feedback

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.

## **Keep a Training Log**

Communication management has been a key driver of our success. When we first set stabilizing goals, we adopted a central filing system. I used to pore through my e-mails 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.

## **Pay Attention to Your Timing**

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 stay enrolled.

The ability to communicate immediately and frequently with these students is invaluable in keeping them on campus, 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.

### Rely on Cross-Training

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 that may need individualized attention.

### Monitor Your Training Program

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.

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