Student attrition has been a focal point of discussion in higher education for many years. Despite all of the dialogue, an enormous number of students still drop out of college before they achieve their educational objectives. Lenning (1980) reports that it is not uncommon for colleges and universities to experience attrition rates ranging from twenty-five percent to sixty-five percent of their freshman classes. In recent years public, private, two-year, and four-year institutions have uniformly expressed interest in reducing their dropout rates (Stadtman, 1980). Two-year public colleges, however, have been the most likely to experience the highest and most sustained attrition rates. It has become clear to many institutions that keeping students is now at least as important as attracting students.

Over the past decade, the expanding volume of literature on retention has suggested numerous approaches to help identify the demographic variables that may lead students to drop out of college. (Chickering, 1974; Cope and Hannah, 1975; Newlon, 1980; Pantages and Creedon, 1978; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980). Unfortunately, attempts to find relationships between those variables and actual attrition predictors have often produced inconclusive or contradictory results. The conclusion from a review of the literature on retention is that little agreement exists concerning policies and activities that can effectively reduce attrition on our nation's campuses.

Round (1981) suggested that this lack of agreement may be due to the fact that research on college persistence has primarily been conducted in the "academic laboratory," with most studies "relying too heavily on ex post facto methodology." As a result, most retention studies conducted since the early seventies have been more descriptive than prescriptive in nature. Very little has been written that prescribes specific activities that institutions can implement to successfully reduce student attrition (Jones, 1984).

A recent synthesis of national retention studies prepared by Kernener, Baldridge, and Green (1982) identified important trends concerning strategies that are most commonly pursued to reduce attrition. They found:

- Given the broad spectrum of academic and student services identified in the literature that might decrease attrition, only a handful had actually been tried by a significant number of institutions.
- Improved advising was clearly the approach most often utilized to increase retention but other common efforts emphasized increasing remedial programs.
- Few institutions had attempted anything other than advising and a few curricular changes.
- Most of the strategies employed by the colleges and universities had been judged ineffective in reducing student attrition.

Institutions focusing isolated retention activities on perceived single casual factors have found that their efforts possess little magical influence on attrition. This type of "hocus-pocus without a focus" has yielded only limited success (Jones, 1984).

Attrition is the result of an extremely intricate interaction among a large number of variables—not just academics. Consequently, attempts to isolate single causal factors are often misguided and ultimately futile (Levitz and Noel, 1980). This is the primary reason that retention activities of a purely academic nature (advising, remedial programs, academic placement) have been relatively unsuccessful, when used in isolation, in reducing student attrition. Most students who drop out of college are not in academic jeopardy. The literature suggests that community/junior college students are four times more likely to drop out for nonacademic reasons than for academic reasons.

With approaches to resolving the retention problem unclear, Keim (1981) stated that many colleges, particularly community colleges, have responded to the challenge in a "Chicken-Little fashion, with a look toward heaven, a shrug of the shoulders, and a pronouncement of doom." She suggests that such an attitude is inappropriate and that improving retention rates at the community college may be difficult but is by no means impossible. The challenge then is to increase both enrollment and reenrollment (by increasing student retention rates) without establishing expensive, labor-intensive programs and services.

Creating the Necessary

Environment for Retention: It is important that an institution focus only on "unnecessary" student attrition. This requires a mindset that all student attrition is not necessarily bad and that there will inevitably be a certain level of "natural" attrition that occurs when students drop out due to conditions beyond the control of the institution. Unnecessary attrition, that type which can be predicted and prevented by the institution, must become the target of all retention activities. Accepting that focus requires an agreement with the philosophy that the time has come to concern ourselves with institutional deficiencies, and to stop rationalizing negative results as the explicit outcome of student deficiencies (Zwerling, 1980).

Successful strategies to reduce attrition can be developed; however, no cookbook formula works for all institutions. Each college must first identify its own needs and problems and then develop its own unique plan to reduce student attrition (Jones, 1982). Although this may sound complex, it does not need to become a complex process.

The specific type of program that a given institution must implement to reduce unnecessary student attrition is a function of: (1) its enrollment objectives, (2) past efforts to reduce attrition, (3) campus awareness and preparedness to address the
retention problem, (4) available research on attrition-related factors at that institution, and (5) the available resources already in place with which to attack the problem. In most cases, additional resources are not necessary to successfully implement a retention plan. Most institutions simply need to do a more effective job of targeting existing programs and services to those students who most need them.

That logic seems profoundly simple. If additional resources to attack the problem are unnecessary, why then are more colleges not doing a better job of reducing their high student attrition rates? Basically, there are three reasons why:

- A lack of awareness of the reasons why students leave a specific institution and what can be done to help students stay in college and complete their educational objectives.
- A lack of commitment/belief in the efficacy of a formal, well-defined, widely-communicated retention program.
- An unwillingness among top management to reorganize existing personnel and resources to more effectively address the retention problem.

Consequently, in order to develop a successful retention program, an institution must first address these attitudinal, organizational, and administrative barriers before advancing to a service-delivery phase.

On many campuses perceptions as to why students drop out are more often erroneous than not. Consequently, the first step to creating the appropriate environment for student retention is to conduct a general faculty/staff awareness workshop on “who drop out? ” “why?” and “what can be done to help students persist?” If the entire faculty cannot participate, then a cross-section of campus personnel should attend the workshop. Increasing institutional awareness that attrition is detrimental to the college as well as to its students, and identifying Ways to predict and prevent unnecessary attrition, will normally convince faculty and staff members that a retention program can be as effective as it is necessary. Convincing administrators of the advantages of such a program is often a more difficult task.

In most cases an attrition cost analysis can be effectively used to convert all types of administrators ranging from the most cautious to the most callous. This can be achieved by calculating the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) students who have dropped out of the last four freshmen classes. Part-time and full-time student losses should be included in the calculations. If exact figures are not available, conservative estimates should be used. Calculations of foregone revenues should include not only lost tuition and fees but also formula funding and auxiliary revenues as well.

In most cases the total annual revenue loss will be a six-digit or even a seven-digit number. At four different community colleges visited recently, the totals ranged from $880,000 to $2.4 million a year in lost revenues due specifically to Student attrition. That kind of data can be very persuasive. Administrators know that it is unrealistic to expect to retain every student, but when asked how they could better allocate the increased revenues generated by only a twenty-five Percent decrease in student attrition, most administrators suddenly became very receptive to the development of a student retention program.

Campus-Based Research

Once a campus-wide commitment has been made to developing a student-retention program, efforts must be made to identify attrition-related factors at the specific institution. The next step would be to determine why students leave the college and what specific attitudes and factors at that institution contribute to student attrition. This is accomplished in two ways:

- By conducting a series of interviews with separate groups of students, faculty, staff, and administrators.
- By conducting primary research with former students and current students to determine why some students drop out and some persist at the given institution.

The research findings can be used to develop a model profile of the type of students (characteristics, academic/social backgrounds, goals and expectations) who have dropped out of that specific college

Predicting and Preventing

Unnecessary attrition. Once an awareness workshop has been conducted and a data base has been compiled from campus research efforts, an early alert system should be designed. The purpose of this system is to identify which entering freshmen exhibit a high probability of dropping out based on correlations between their personal characteristics and expectations and the research profile on previous dropouts. An early alert system of this type requires the following components:

- The correlations between new student profiles and former student profiles can then be statistically generated to identify new students with high dropout probabilities.
- Once student with a high risk of dropping out have been identified, a printout giving name, address, telephone number, and the reasons why the students are high risk (academic or otherwise) can be produced.
- Department heads, faculty members, advisors, aid counselors should each be assigned small numbers of high risk students to contact and discuss academic and student services on campus that can help address the students’ identified needs.

Since it is extremely important that follow-up activities be completed within the first few weeks of classes, most colleges incorporate the new student questionnaire into their registration procedures for freshmen. Doing so allows ample time to produce individualized student printouts and to make follow-up assignments by the end of the third week of classes.

Each institution must determine which intervention (follow-up) services it currently offers that will be most effective at increasing student success. If sufficiently large numbers of students are identified as having needs for which no services currently exist new, cost-effective programs and services can be planned for future implementation.

Conclusions

Successful retention programs seem to have a number of commonalities, not so much in the services and activities, but in the method of operation and the attitudes of those who provide the services. One of the significant contributors to success is the personal contact between campus employees and students. Experience indicates that helping the high-risk student establish a linkage with the college through either a personal relationship with a staff member, involvement in campus organizations, or a campus-based work assignment appears to be the single-most effective means of reducing attrition. Quality advisement, a broad range of academic support services, adequate financial assistance, specialized
counseling and career development, admissions testing and placement— and responsive, quality instruction are all important factors. But establishing a college/student linkage appears to be the most critical element to successful retention efforts.

Most colleges currently provide many of the academic and student services necessary to address the student attrition problem but they also continue to have high attrition rates. To be more successful at reducing unnecessary attrition, colleges need to identify specific needs (academic and nonacademic) that students possess upon entering the freshman class. They need to determine what services can best meet those specific student needs and to recognize that simply providing services is often insufficient. The timeliness of the service delivery and the attitudes of the service deliverers require careful attention if student retention programs are to be more successful in the future.

The time has come to stop waving a magic wand and hoping for positive results. Reducing student attrition is not easy; but it is not impossible either. No magic is required; however, institution-wide awareness, administrative commitment, and a well-organized delivery system are required. The benefits of reducing the attrition rate far outweigh the costs. The futures of thousands of college students, and perhaps dozens of colleges, hang in the balance.

References
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