10 Strategies to Increase Student Retention

Right now, student retention is one of the biggest topics in higher education. Since the economic downturn in 2008, graduation rates have dropped and few higher education professionals know how to effectively address the issue. As it stands now, only 66 percent of four-year public universities and 54 percent of private institutions have developed actionable plans to improve student retention rates. What can higher education professionals do to address student retention?

The Underlying Factors of Poor Student Retention

To understand declining student retention rates, it's critical to understand why students choose to leave school. According to a paper published by Oakton Community College, only 20–30 percent of the students who leave college do so because of academic difficulties. The other 70–80 percent leave due to the following factors:

- **Cost.** The cost of higher education has been rising steadily for decades, and students without financial assistance or parental aid often find this financial burden too great to bear.
- **Isolation.** Many students either do not or cannot reach out to faculty members for assistance with coursework, which leaves them feeling isolated in their studies.
- **Social difficulties.** Students who find that they have trouble integrating into a social group or making friends in higher education often choose to leave school.
- **Unclear expectations.** Many students believe that the academic and personal expectations at their college or university have never been made clear, and they fail to obtain a degree because of it.

While the reasons students leave school are many and varied, these are the most common. By understanding these unique challenges, higher education staff can develop innovative and efficient programs to boost retention rate and help students...
stay in school.

10 Strategies for Boosting Student Retention

To address the problem of low student retention rates, institutions of higher learning must do the following:

1. **Teach Students Habits for Success**
   
   Many students abandon colleges or universities because they don't understand what is expected of them or are unfamiliar with the resources the university offers. Because of this, it's critical for universities to make campus resources available to students through convocation, orientation and first-year seminars.

   Additionally, universities need to ensure that students understand what GPAs keep them in good academic standing, and what activities and opportunities they can participate in to become more involved with the university.

2. **Develop Small Goals**
   
   Right now, only 53 percent of public colleges have definable goals for student retention. Unfortunately, universities that don't set goals have a harder time measuring success and putting effective programs in place. Because of this, it's critical for schools to establish goals for student retention and degree attainment. By first breaking these goals down to programs, courses and departments, universities can develop effective programs that can then be scaled to encompass the entire university.

3. **Collect Data and Put It to Good Use**
   
   To address the problem of low student retention rates, universities must gather data on program effectiveness, student achievement and resource allocation. Once this data has been collected, it can serve to enhance student retention efforts intelligently year after year. A good way to collect data is to use a student management system.

4. **Develop Intervention Programs**
   
   One of the most efficient ways to improve student retention is to reach at-risk students before they leave the university. Institutions like Beaufort County Community College do this by implementing an early alert student referral program: Students who are experiencing academic, personal, financial or social problems receive a letter informing them of the college's resources and available workshops that can help them address the issue at hand.

5. **Define "Student Success"**
   
   When a university builds a shared vision of student success, it becomes easier for students to identify with the goal, while also allowing the institution to allocate and organize resources to support the goal of student success.

6. **Combine the Strength of All Resources**
   
   Student retention is a large issue, and it's one that universities will continue to struggle addressing unless all available resources are used. This means combining the power of professors who first notice student absences with that of financial aid officers able to implement creative financial solutions and student affairs specialists who can put an at-risk student in touch with available resources. By crafting a comprehensive approach to student retention, universities can be more effective and students can reap the benefits of increased support.
7. Offer Ample Opportunities for Success
Students who feel that college is a Sisyphean task are likely to leave, so it's critical for universities to provide students with ample opportunities for success. This means setting high but achievable expectations and helping students set goals that support achievement.

8. Poll Students
One of the best ways to keep students from leaving and curtail issues before they arise is to survey students regularly. This allows the administration to act upon feedback and address issues as they arise.

9. Focus on Building Community
Establishing community both in and out of the classroom is an effective way to build a network for students, which squashes feelings of isolation. A sense of community can also support healthy study habits and high academic performance.

10. Increase Resources for Academic Advising
Academic advising is a critical factor in student success. Helpful, knowledgeable, accessible advisors are essential for helping students access campus programs and resources and improving retention rates.

The Future of Student Retention
While the issue of student retention is a pressing one, the news isn't all bad. Universities and colleges that take the time to implement a well-thought-out plan for student retention can improve degree attainment rates and help prepare students for successful and satisfying post-academic lives.

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