



5 STUDENT RETENTION STRATEGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Best Practices for Keeping Students Engaged and Enrolled in 2025 and Beyond

U.S. student enrollment and retention numbers have increased modestly since 2020, yet traditional-age students are increasingly questioning whether higher education is right for them.

While student recruitment remains a significant challenge for colleges and universities, institutions must also redouble their efforts to retain every current student in order to maintain overall enrollment numbers and institutional fiscal health.

Higher education leaders can effectively address retention by monitoring student needs, tracking signals of attrition, and providing relevant support services that help enrolled students engage and thrive.

THE RISING COST OF ATTRITION



NEARLY 1 IN 3 STUDENTS LEFT COLLEGE IN 2023

While the national retention rate increased 1.9% between 2020 and 2022, 31.8% of students who enrolled in fall 2022 did not return in fall 2023

Source: National Student Clearinghouse



U.S. COMPLETION RATE HAS STALLED SINCE 2015

The six-year completion rate for first-time, full-time undergraduates between 2017–2022 was 62.2%, nearly the same as a decade ago

Source: National Student Clearinghouse



\$16 BILLION IN LOST REVENUE

U.S. institutions lose approximately \$16 billion each year due to student attrition

Source: Education Policy Institute

WHY STUDENTS LEAVE

While students have always cited financial or time-related reasons for withdrawing from college, students in recent years are citing a wider array of reasons for abandoning their studies, including changes in their personal motivations, their health, and their sense of belonging.



87%
Financial Cost



81%
Work Conflicts



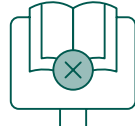
74%
Emotional Stress



73%
Time to Complete



71%
Favorable Job Market



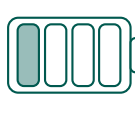
70%
Lack of Remote Options or Class Flexibility



64%
Mental Health Reasons



64%
College Not Required for Job/Career



61%
Lack of Interest in Additional Education



57%
Physical Health Reasons

Source: Gallup

IDENTIFYING STUDENTS AT RISK OF ATTRITION

Many things can influence students' decisions to stop out. The factors fall into two categories: academic and non-academic. Indicators from both categories can act as an early warning signal to identify at-risk students and to develop programs and offerings that can help with retention.

✓ = Predictor of Persistence ! = Risk of Attrition



TOP ACADEMIC FACTORS



PREPARATION

- ✓ Strong high school GPA
- ✓ Strong undergraduate first-year GPA
- ✓ Higher SAT scores
- ✓ More rigorous high school coursework (e.g., advanced placement courses)
- ! Enrollment in remedial courses in the first semester of college



PROGRESS

- ✓ The rate at which a student progresses toward a degree or credential by earning credit hours and passing courses
- ✓ Beginning the first year with a specific intended major and career path
- ✓ Full-time status
- ! Part-time status
- ! Failing to make academic progress
- ! Not declaring a major by the end of the first year



ENGAGEMENT

- ✓ Positive faculty-student interactions
- ✓ Taking advantage of resources that promote academic success (e.g., tutoring, advising)
- ! A poor attendance record



TOP NON-ACADEMIC FACTORS



SOCIAL

- ✓ Established relationships with peers, along with mentors and faculty
- ✓ Participation in student organizations
- ✓ Interventions for minority students to increase their sense of social belonging



FINANCIAL

- ✓ Availability of financial aid
- ✓ Financial aid packages consisting of grants instead of loans for low income and minority students
- ! Excessive employment outside of school
- ! Financial aid that does not cover on-campus housing



DEMOGRAPHIC

- ✓ First-year GPA and performance in first-year math and English courses particularly for minority students
- ! First-generation status

BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING RETENTION

To increase their retention rates, institutions should focus on building concrete and measurable strategies that directly address the causes of student attrition.

1.

COLLECT AND ANALYZE STUDENT RETENTION DATA ACROSS DIFFERENT VARIABLES

Institutions should not only measure overall student retention rates, but also analyze them across different dimensions (e.g., by year, course, and/or discipline) to understand which areas have the highest risk of attrition and to develop targeted interventions. Collect data including:

- Year-to-year retention rates
- Second-year students who achieve sophomore standing
- Course withdrawal rates
- Success rates in the 25 to 35 courses with the largest annual enrollment
- Success rates in the first credit-bearing math courses
- Attrition rates for students in different fields
- Credits completed contingent on the academic milestones and on-track indicators known to affect retention

2.

INTERVIEW STUDENTS WHO ARE LEAVING

While some students will choose to leave despite your best efforts, valuable information can still be collected and used to help drive retention for other students. To identify areas for improvement and to uncover gaps in your offerings, ask students who are leaving questions such as:

- Have you spoken with your advisor or other faculty when contemplating withdrawal?
- What are the reasons you are choosing to withdraw?
- What is your assessment of your experience at this institution?
- Is there a student service you felt was missing from your experience?
- Did you feel appropriately supported by your professors and school faculty?
- Are you transferring to another institution? Where and why?
- What are your plans for the future? And how can we assist?

3.

ENSURE YOUR STUDENTS HAVE THE SUPPORT THEY NEED

Colleges and universities need to offer enhanced support and benefits to keep students engaged with and committed to their current institution. Develop student support strategies that target individual academic, personal, financial, and social variables that affect student persistence, such as:

- A strong mix of support services and resources, such as mental health, basic needs, life skills, success coaching, peer mentorship, and a community referral system
- An honors program for academically advanced students
- Robust academic support for students who need additional assistance
- Programs designed specifically for first-year students
- Work opportunities related to their intended major (e.g., internships, volunteer work, experiential learning, service learning)
- Regular one-on-one advising sessions with professional staff members
- Training residence hall staff to recognize at-risk students

4.

FOCUS ON BUILDING POSITIVE STUDENT-FACULTY ENGAGEMENT

Faculty play a critical role in student retention. Students are most likely to persist when they feel a consistent sense of belonging, competence, and social engagement in the classroom. By designing a relevant and student-centered curriculum, communicating effectively with students, and engaging them in the learning process, faculty members can help raise student retention rates.

- Create a safe classroom climate that is warm, open, and organized to promote feelings of belonging
- Provide experiences that build upon students' strengths and instill a sense of purpose
- Use a variety of assessment instruments that can be readily scored
- Interact with students. Learn their preferred first names and pronouns, talk after class, smile, praise performance, and actively respond to create positive faculty-student relationships
- Strive to understand each student's challenges and potential
- Ensure that students feel comfortable with materials and teaching styles
- Identify at-risk students and offer appropriate training and guidance
- Provide concrete experiences and engage students to process deep learning

5.

REASSESS YOUR FINANCIAL AID STRATEGIES

Strategically distributed financial aid can positively affect student persistence rates. Cost-effective strategies for promoting student retention through financial aid disbursement include:

- Simplify the financial aid application process and ensure students have access to financial aid information including guidance around deadlines
- Target financial aid to students with the largest unmet needs
- Make financial aid contingent on academic milestones and on-track indicators

Retain more students by aligning with their needs and perceptions. Download the 2024 National Admitted Student Survey.