

U.S. Colleges Falling Short on Helping Students Stay in School

IOWA CITY, Iowa—U.S. colleges and universities are falling short when it comes to helping students stay in school and complete their degrees, according to two new reports from ACT. The reports urge colleges to make student retention a priority. They also point to practices which have proven to be effective in reducing the number of dropouts.

"Retention of students remains a significant issue for U.S. colleges and universities, with a substantial number of students not returning for their second year of school," said Richard L. Ferguson, ACT's chief executive officer. "Our findings suggest colleges can do more to reduce those dropout rates."

View the reports:

Research Report: What Works in Student Retention

Policy Report: The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention (PDF: 41 pages; 615KB)

The results of a new ACT survey of officials at more than 1,000 two- and four-year colleges and universities indicate an alarming number of schools have no specific plan or goals in place to improve student retention and degree completion. The findings also suggest that colleges tend to put the blame for dropping out primarily on students, rather than on themselves.

"It's one thing to admit students to college; it's quite another to retain them," said Ferguson. "Colleges spend a lot of money and effort recruiting students, but many need to do a better job of following through after they get them on campus."

Data collected by ACT show that up to one-fourth of all students at four-year colleges do not return for their second year of school. The National Center for Education Statistics indicates that dropout rates are particularly high for African American and Hispanic students. Other student populations at greater risk of dropping out include those who are the first in their family to attend college, those who have limited English proficiency, and nontraditional students such as returning adult students.

"When a student drops out of college, everyone loses—the student, the college, and the greater society," said ACT's Ferguson. "Retention and persistence are important issues that impact not only colleges, but our entire country and its future competitiveness in the global economy."

Students' academic readiness is a key factor in college retention, as students who are well prepared for college coursework are more likely than those who aren't to stay in school. A recent ACT report, Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work, indicated that the overwhelming majority (83%) of students who meet all college readiness benchmarks in English, math, and science on the ACT college admissions exam return for their second year of college.

A new ACT Policy Report, however, indicates that academic help alone is not enough to keep many students in school. The report, an exhaustive review of existing research on retention and persistence, suggests students also need individual support to feel connected to the campus community.

"Helping students succeed in the classroom is a very positive step, but if students feel isolated or feel as if they don't fit in they won't stay," said Ferguson. "It's important for colleges to offer programs and services that integrate first-year students into the social fabric of the college community, so that they feel a part of campus life from the very start of their college experience."

The two new ACT reports identify a number of specific practices that appear to be highly effective in increasing student retention. These include social integration practices such as extended orientation courses, big brother/big sister and faculty mentor programs, and multicultural centers; academic advising practices such as advising centers and interventions with potentially at-risk students; and learning support practices such as learning assistance centers, supplemental instruction, and remedial coursework.

Students tend to drop out because their expectations of college—academically, socially, or both—don't match up with the reality once they get there," said Ferguson. "Any practice that can help students get through this adjustment period is likely to help increase retention."

Based on the findings of the two reports, ACT recommends that colleges create a structured, comprehensive retention program geared to assist students as they make the transition to college life. Specifically, ACT suggests colleges should:

Designate a senior-level individual on campus to coordinate retention activities.

Analyze student characteristics and needs and then implement a formal retention program that best meets those needs and the needs of the institution.

Take an integrated approach to retention efforts that incorporates both academic and non-academic factors.

Implement an early-alert assessment and monitoring system to identify students at risk of dropping out.

"Student retention is everyone's business on a college campus," said Eric White, executive director of the Division of Undergraduate Studies at Penn State University and president of the National Academic Advising Association. "A thoroughly integrated and coordinated approach needs to be taken to assure success."

Many colleges, according to the ACT survey results, have not yet made retention efforts a high priority. Fewer than half (47%) of all college officials responding to the survey say they have established a goal for improved retention of first-year students, and only a third (33%) say they have established a goal for improved degree completion. In addition, only around half (52%) say they have an individual on staff who is responsible for coordinating retention strategies.

"If we take the view that institutions appoint individuals to exercise clear-cut authority and leadership for the most valued organizational functions and tasks, then the fact that only half of our colleges have appointed a retention coordinator is a disturbing indicator of the low value that retention still claims," said John Gardner, executive director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College and senior fellow at the National Resource Center on the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.

The findings also suggest colleges are more likely to blame students than their own practices for high dropout rates. College officials, when given lists of both student and institution characteristics that might affect a student's decision to drop out, identified 13 student characteristics (e.g., lack of motivation, inadequate preparation, inadequate financial resources and poor study skills) that they felt significantly contribute to student attrition. In contrast, respondents identified only two institution characteristics (amount of financial aid available and student-institution fit) as having a significant impact on attrition.

"It is quite troubling that, in spite of all we know from three decades of research on student retention, colleges are still inclined to hold students largely responsible for their retention, while dramatically minimizing the institutional role in this problem," said Gardner.

The ACT research report, "What Works in Student Retention," is based on surveys completed and returned by officials at nearly one-third of the colleges across the country, including 629 four-year colleges and 386 two-year public colleges.



MS. OLIVER

NCCU Director of Scholarships and Student Financial Aid President of NCASFAA

Sharon Oliver, NCCU's director of scholarships and student aid, has been elected president of the North Carolina Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NCASFAA).

As President of the state organization, Oliver will lead an executive board that consists of about 25 members.

Oliver also sits on a regional board of Southern Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (SASFAA) that serves Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.

Oliver was elected to the office at the 2003 NCASFAA Conference and will serve as president until 2005.

Oliver has been director of scholarships and student aid at NCCU for eight years and was previously employed at Shaw University.

"I think one of the most valuable things we do in this organization and here in this office is we put the students first," said Oliver. "When developing training sessions, decisions are based on what is best for our students."

NCASFAA's three goals are to develop and strengthen the professional competency of student financial aid administrators employed by North Carolina postsecondary institutions, agencies, and private and community organizations; to strengthen and enhance student financial aid programs so that no qualified person desirous of a postsecondary education shall be denied that opportunity due to a lack of financial resources; and to facilitate communication among educational institutions, agencies, and sponsors of student assistance funds, through the exchange of ideas and information.

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