Early Warning Systems:
Improving Student Retention And Success

Deirdre Billings

UNITEC
Auckland, New Zealand

dbillings@unitec.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

This paper notes the significant cost - moral, social and economic - of the increasingly low levels of student retention and success across tertiary educational institutions internationally. The resultant flawed educational achievement creates long-term obstacles for individual career progression and life satisfaction and impacts on society in general.

In an endeavour to address this situation, strategies are proposed which aim to break down the barriers that inhibit the academic and social integration of students. A multi-dimensional, holistic and synergistic focus is taken. The goal is to target all aspects and all levels of campus life - organisational, managerial, academic and allied staff and students. Particular focus is given to the importance of a demonstrated institutional commitment to EEdO promulgated from senior management level and reflected via mission statements, Directorate appointments, institutional committees, equity coordination roles and marketing media messages.

Emphasis is also given to the importance of involving students in success and retention endeavours and ensuring they are heard at committee level. Further focus is given to the development of effective student support systems including remedial programmes, family-friendly timetables and liaison/mentoring programmes. In addition, the need for speedy, effective and highly visible response to student quality feedback is also discussed.

The crucial significance of staff/student relationships and implications of retention efforts on staff workload are considered. In this connection, the importance of developing staff awareness and commitment through training programmes and boosting morale through recognition and support are highlighted.

In particular, a proactive stance is advocated in making use of early warning strategies to identify those students identified as being at risk in the first year of study and supporting them towards realisation of their goals.

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing cross-national concern about the success and retention of students in tertiary education over the past 20 years (Walters 1997) yet the current levels of student failure and attrition continue to be unacceptable. The large number of students who do not complete their education imposes

considerable cost on all stakeholders and creates long-term obstacles for the career progression and life satisfaction of individuals. This flawed educational achievement impacts on society as a whole.

In an effort to formulate specific strategies to overcome these deleterious factors, I submit the following broad overview and perspective based on my lengthy tertiary education experience and recent research. These strategies take a multi-dimensional and holistic focus and emphasise the desirability of synergistic support elements at all levels of campus life.

2. THE ORGANISATION

At an organisational level it is important that a commitment to student retention and success and to equal educational opportunity is demonstrated. The EEdO philosophy must be espoused and promulgated from senior management level and supported throughout the institution.

The following specific strategies are proposed at this organisational level:

♦ A philosophical and demonstrated focus on 'Incrementalism' is advisable. This constitutes a step-by-step approach to change that allows staff to fully understand, appreciate and adopt strategies for supporting and empowering students from their very first day on campus.

♦ There needs to be demonstrated consistency at all levels with the philosophy of EEdO and the value placed on diversity. When respected role models throughout the institution walk the talk, others will follow their lead.

♦ It is vital to have an enunciated and highly visible organisational commitment to identifying and removing the educational barriers for students. In particular, organisations must target the barriers that restrict entry, full participation and academic development for those who are not in the traditional or typical dominant student group.

♦ The commitment to an EEdO philosophy should be promoted in corporate marketing strategies, particularly the internet site - along the lines of Auckland University's Unlimited Opportunity web-page banners (Auckland University 2000).

♦ Management must recognise the impact of retention efforts on staff workload in the form of rewards and incentives.

♦ A further incentive is the development of an institutional-wide awareness of the interrelatedness of all campus activities, together with the importance of symbolism and day-to-day staff/student interactions in creating and maintaining a humanistic educational ethos. Staff training workshops would be valuable in increasing this understanding.

♦ There needs to be a commitment at all levels of management to re-examine the corporate Mission and priorities with full consultation and feedback from staff and students.

♦ The appointment of a fully tenured Director for Student Retention and Success or Director of Equal Educational Opportunity would go a long way towards promoting and demonstrating the organisation's commitment to EEdO.

♦ An Equal Educational Opportunity Committee should be appointed to monitor and report on institutional performance relating to access to education. This committee would seek input from various staff and student bodies including Student Liaison Managers (or Equity Coordinators) at School level and would research and develop policies based on this consultation.

3. EARLY WARNING STRATEGIES

In addition to the above strategic oganisational focus, the following early-warning strategies at programme and course level would be valuable in achieving a proactive approach to identifying and supporting at risk students at the earliest possible opportunity:

♦ An early alert programme initiated in order to identify at-risk students and which includes a methodology for identifying potential drop-outs

♦ Centralised or decentralised intrusive advising and retention systems

♦ A retention section within enrolment services

♦ The establishment of a retention committee made up of academic and allied staff and student representatives

♦ The submission of annual Faculty retention reports supplying statistical data and details of the action taken to improve retention

♦ A survey of past and present students to identify areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction

♦ A comparison obtained of student expectations and perceptions of the learning environment

- A survey of students who withdraw or drop out across the campus.
- A standardised institutional-wide system for exit interviews should be investigated. Because of the high incidence of 'disappearing students' who cannot be contacted for exit interviews or for completion of exit interview questionnaires this is a particularly challenging strategy. Identifying and supporting at-risk students when difficulties first become apparent offers a more manageable and effective process than attempting to gather data after the students exit.
- Mentoring programmes along the following lines need to be developed for at risk students:

a Student support in the form of one-to-one peer counselling, study groups and workshops **and/or**

b A targeting programme with staff members meeting with students on a regular basis to discuss study and self-management skills.

4. STUDENT FOCUS

4.1 STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS

First year students are those most at risk of attrition or failure and the first year experience strongly influences a student's decision to withdraw from study at a later date. Strategies for supporting first year students are widely implemented both in Australia and the United States (McInnis 1997 and 1998, Tinto 1995).

The enrolment of first-year students in courses for which they are unsuited or for which they do not meet the entry level criteria are contributory factors in their early withdrawal. Effective pre-admission course counselling that matches student attributes to course requirements would be advantageous as a retention strategy.

Following student entry to a programme it is important that ongoing student support seminars and workshops are identified and initiated by Schools with the aid of student support services personnel. It is imperative that feedback is sought and gained from both staff and students on appropriate support systems so that specific needs can be met.

Further campus-wide support systems should be maintained which include cost-effective child-care services and family-friendly timetabling systems.

A safe campus environment is a priority and strategies need to be developed to ensure student freedom from sexual harassment and threats to personal, moral and physical self-image and wellbeing.

4.2 STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

Students need to feel that they have input into institutional systems and procedures. I propose the establishment of a Student Advisory Committee made up of first year students and reporting to Heads of School with functional communication links to a Director for Student Retention and Success.

4.3 REMEDIAL PROGRAMMES

It is reported that, along with academic under preparedness (defined as a lack of basic literacy, numeracy and English language skills), a lack of academic literacy skills also plays a part in student failure and attrition (Ballard and Clanchy 1988; Chanock 1995). The lack of basic skills can be addressed by bridging education prior to programme entry and development of academic literacy by support during a programme. The view of academic under preparedness is but one factor in student failure and attrition and remedial programmes are certainly not the only answer (Boddy and Neale 1997; Tinto 1989).

4.4 STUDENT LIAISON/MENTORING

Staff and student intermediaries at Faculty or School level can play a major role in assisting students to feel recognised, respected and - above all - heard. The staff role could take the form of Student Liaison Manager and/or Equity Coordinator for each of the at-risk groups. Senior students would be valuable (and possibly more approachable) liaison people who could take on 'buddy' roles in such a student support system.

The student liaison relationship would be promoted through visits to classes, regular meetings with student representatives, attendance at orientations and other ceremonies and events. These activities would be undertaken in consultation with relevant academic and allied staff.

Feedback from student liaison personnel could also be used to research student satisfaction issues in general and formulate a future direction for improvement of success and retention endeavours.

5. STAFF IMPLICATIONS

5.1 STAFF MORALE AND PERFORMANCE

Research needs to be undertaken to ascertain staff morale and in particular the impact of administrative, research and professional development commitments on teaching performance and staff relationships with students.

5.2 STAFF TRAINING

I suggest that feedback be gained from all stakeholders - in particular students - and that staff training plans be explored and initiated as necessary in order to optimise support strategies for student retention and success.

6. QUALITY ASSURANCE

There is a need for speedy and effective response to student quality feedback mechanisms and the action taken must be notified to students. The RMIT Student Services Directory web page RMIT responds to students' needs and concerns is a particularly creditable example of such an initiative (RMIT 2000).

7. CONCLUSION

Further research needs to be undertaken to identify and analyse retention strategies and support the management of change.

In conclusion, I would highlight two goals that are typical of modern-day tertiary educational institutions:

♦ Provide support and equal educational opportunities for our students
   and

♦ Increase Maori participation and success in our programmes and a common tertiary education philosophy:

Our students will therefore commence their tertiary education at a level that reflects both their aspirations and their abilities. They will have the opportunity to progress with confidence and dignity, constantly extending their horizons in an environment of support and encouragement that maximises their chances of success throughout their lives.

Current statistical data inform us that stated institutional goals and philosophy do not appear to be reflected in the reality of actual student experience.

I believe we have a moral and socio-economic obligation to our students and that it is time to live up to our promises and remove any barriers preventing them from achieving their goals.

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