

A Guide for Assessing Student Retention and Recommended Strategies for Change

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Abstract: Academic institutions often measure bottom-line performance using student enrollment; however, the actual number of students who matriculate through to graduation have a significant impact on program and institutional success. In 2023, Bellevue University undertook an initiative to examine prior evidence-based research as the foundation for an internal investigation focused on a student-centered analysis that identified strategies for assessing current trends in student persistence and retention rates. The assessment took a pragmatic, applied perspective to identify university best-practices and analyzed data related to academic programs demonstrating high performance through specific, targeted metrics. Furthermore, interviews with administrators of the top-performing programs provided a cross-section of different curriculum delivery modalities (online or face-to-face) at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Five (5) university programs with exceptionally high retention percentages were examined. Findings identified four (4) categories of best-practices contributing to student retention including a focus on faculty engagement, modes of engagement, communication strategies, and practical and experiential curricula. Six (6) recommendations were supported through the data analysis. Specific examples of student-centered changes are provided. A guide for assisting academic institutions to complete an internal analysis is presented.

keywords: retention strategies; student retention assessment; student persistence

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive summary of findings of the 2022-2023 Retention Committee (RC) related to Bellevue University's student persistence and retention rates and recommendations for changes and improvements. Additionally, this paper provides academicians and student retention professionals with a framework for conducting an internal analysis of their respective institution's student persistence and retention rates that contribute to overall student and institutional success. Academic institutions may apply this information for purposes of creating effective persistence and retention strategies.

At Bellevue University (BU), a months-long analysis was conducted by a multidisciplinary team of university professionals including faculty, administration, student services, advising, accreditation, and enrollment with the goal of identifying best-practices in student persistence and retention rates. The process for conducting this analysis is a central focus of this paper.

Through its examination of prior research and internal assessment, as well as current analysis of persistence and retention rates of high-performing programs at BU, the RC identified several best practices and opportunities for improving trends across the university's academic programs. Five (5) BU programs were specifically examined and their respective program directors were interviewed by the committee. Findings were examined for common themes and redundancies, followed by recommendations for effective retention strategies that may be applied to other BU academic programs across colleges. This paper supports a step-wise procedure for assessing and implementing persistence and retention strategies at other academic institutions.

Background and Literature Review

In 2018, a committee within Bellevue University worked to demonstrate the alignment of university-based persistence and retention initiatives with external research and best practices. The committee created a procedure for developing proactive interventions that supported the improvement of student persistence and retention rates. At that time, the committee identified several best practices from reports by the National Survey of Student Engagement and others that impacted student persistence and retention rates. Several best practices aligned with persistence and retention initiatives including onboarding assessments, use of early alerts to target at-risk students, creation of learning communities, career guidance, belonging and inclusion, and effective communication.

The importance of helping students develop an academic mindset was clearly visible throughout the findings detailed later in this report. The 2019 Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) national report, “A Mind at Work: Maximizing the Relationship Between Mindset and Student Success,” captured and defined academic mindset stating, “Academic mindset encompasses individuals’ beliefs about the ways learning and intelligence work. These beliefs frame students’ thinking, influence how they interpret events, and ultimately affect their success” (CCCSE, 2019, pg. 2).

Adjunct Faculty Impact on Student Retention

One of the primary themes in this project was the importance of supporting, selecting, and nurturing adjunct faculty. Guthrie, Wyrick, and Navarrete (2019) focused on this theme by acknowledging that while adjunct faculty play a large role in student success, little is done to guide or to provide resources to adjunct faculty. In the study conducted by these researchers, providing an orientation for adjunct faculty and compensating them for the attendance, along with providing development opportunities, had a positive impact on student retention.

Not only did some researchers show that adjunct instructors struggled to engage in their institutions, scholarly studies also suggested that when students took courses from adjunct instructors, those students also tended not to be as engaged on their campuses (Childress, 2019; Harrington & Schibik, 2001; Hollis, 2015; Jaeger & Eagan, 2010; Johnson, 2006; Smith, 2010; Tirelli, 1997; Twigg, 1989). Researchers have extensively detailed the importance of supporting student engagement (Bain, 2004; Kuh, 2009; Kuh et al., 2008).

Guthrie, et al., (2019) demonstrated that adjunct faculty play a large role in student success, but they were given minimal guidance. Adjunct faculty can be more effectively engaged in student success when provided with modest resources; for example, at Cal Poly Pomona, adjuncts were compensated for attending required workshops about teaching practices, policies related to the university, and the many teaching programs being offered. Some of these workshops included course redesign, Quality Matters (www.qualitymatters.org) certification and high-impact educational practices (HIP) programs. Alternatively, not intentionally communicating with adjunct faculty lessened those instructors’ engagement with the university, which in turn negatively affected student retention (Guthrie, et al., 2019).

Another key point was that if institutions were committed to employing adjunct faculty, in what ways may available data be used to pursue avenues through which student persistence, retention and academic performance may be improved (Heath et al., 2022)? The point is that academic institutions must ensure that expectations are clear and manageable, and support is in place for adjuncts to meet expectations.

Full-Time Faculty and Persistence and Retention

The person who teaches the first course in the program has a crucial responsibility to connect with the students, as demonstrated by Heath et al. (2022). The study compared various components of persistence and retention for two student groups: those taught by adjuncts and those taught by full-time faculty. The study showed a significant difference between the two groups. Specifically, General Education courses taught by adjuncts experienced higher rates of problems reported by students than if the course was taught by full-time faculty (Heath et al., 2022).

What to take from this study is that, as many of the interviewers in the current project stated, focus must be put on adjunct faculty expectations, engagement, and development, which is not to say that when discussing adjunct vs. full-time faculty, one is better than the other, but that success in student retention is due to consistency and the level of personal engagement with each student. A study by Health, et al. (2022) also suggested that academic administrators may want to consider a strategy for hiring full-time instructors.

Engagement and Communication

Engagement and communication are discussed as central themes in the findings later in this report and scholars at the forefront of student retention research (Smith & Tinto, 2022) continue to work toward understanding how to build them. The engagement practices identified in this report align with the research. Affective engagement precedes other forms of engagement including behavioral, academic, and cognitive approaches.

As Hurtado and Carter (1996) argued, it is not engagement, per se, that influences students' behavior, but students' perceptions of their engagement and the meanings they derive from them as to belonging and being valued. Students who feel valued within a particular context are more likely to engage or to expand engagement. Tinto (2015) argued that this is the case because of the impact student perceptions of their engagements have on student motivation. A key takeaway from this article is parallel to what selected BU Program Directors experienced, and is stated as such. A stronger sense of belonging leads to students being more involved in social activities, academics and critical thought. Involvement influences their motivation (Ben-Eliyahu et al., 2018), thus fueling their engagement, which can affect participation in university-wide opportunities (Ceci & Papierno, 2005; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Tinto, 2021; Smith & Tinto, 2022).

As an example, Jin, et al. (2019) showed how the University of Texas at El Paso created a process in which experiential learning and research mentoring were implemented for freshmen and sophomores. Students who were surveyed reported increased awareness and interest in solving problems and increased likelihood to pursue science, technology, engineering and mathematic (STEM) careers (Jin, et al., 2019).

Another example from the research demonstrated how engagement as well as curriculum aided in student retention. Tharayil, et al. (2018) studied methods that instructors used to encourage student participation in active learning. These researchers showed that when instructors designed activities so that resistance to active learning was reduced, student participation increased, which was proven to be an effective tool to increase recollection of what was being taught. The positive effects of engagement were also demonstrated in the literature from Kvam (2000). This research compared retention from two groups of students. One group was taught using traditional lecture methods and the other group was taught using group projects and cooperative methods. Results were measured immediately after the course ended and then eight months later, which suggested that active learning can increase retention.

Curriculum Design

Good curriculum design was also a theme uncovered by the RC. Again, there is literature to support these findings. Dietz-Uhler, et al. (2007) reviewed methods to improve student retention and focused on course design. These authors chose to design courses using Quality Matters, which focused on eight (8) general review standards. After using Quality Matters design standards, the retention rates for courses increased.

Along with practices already described such as experiential learning, Hempel, et al. (2019) provided support for how the curriculum is designed to increase student retention. These authors describe using clarity of expectations within the syllabus, obtaining mid-semester feedback from students, grading and homework strategies, suggestions for homework, attendance, exams, and rubrics. These authors point to these practices individually, but then connect the practices back to the four domains including a growth mindset, self-efficacy, metacognition, and belongingness. Using the logic that these four domains will improve access and inclusiveness, the RC could make a case for connecting this work back to the theme of engagement.

Assessing Persistence and Retention Rates

The method of examining the data, in itself, provided a step-wise process for analyzing persistence and retention data that was easily adopted and used for assessment at BU. This process may potentially be adapted to most academic institutions for internal persistence and retention analysis. Each step of the process is discussed below.

Step 1 – Identifying Exceptional Programs

The Retention Committee began its data collection and analysis by first identifying programs with what was considered by the committee to be exceptional persistence and retention rates. The committee also considered program-based progress statistics, including Completed-Passed (student earned a passing grade), Completed-Failed (student completed the class but earned a failing grade), Withdrawn (student started the course but dropped after the drop deadline), Post-start Drop (student dropped the course before the drop deadline), and Pre-start Drop (student dropped the course before it started). In addition, specific student data was collected for all BU programs including the total number of students enrolled each term per program, longevity in their respective program, degree format, enrollment through external partnerships, degree level and transfer hours.

Persistence and retention rates were measured using the following criteria. 3rd Term Persistence measured if a new student returned for a 3rd term (i.e., if a student started in the Fall term, their 3rd term persistence would check to see if they are in a Spring class). 1 Year Retention measured if a new student was still enrolled 1 year after starting (i.e., if a student started in the Fall term, 1 year retention measures if they were in a class in the next Fall term).

Exceptional persistence and retention rates were considered to be above average ($\geq 70\%$ 3rd Term Persistence, $\geq 65\%$ 1-year). The overall undergraduate average 3rd Term Persistence rate is 64% and overall undergraduate average 1 year Retention rate is 53%. The overall graduate-level average 3rd Term Persistence rate was 70% and overall graduate-level average 1 year Retention rate was 62%. Five (5) programs met these criteria and were chosen for the project. Tables 1 through 5 provide detailed information on the program format (graduate cohort, undergraduate cohort, graduate 12-week terms, undergraduate 12-week terms), 3rd Term Persistence and 1 year Retention rates for the following programs, respectively.

- Master of Science in Organizational Performance
- Bachelor of Science in Management of Human Resources
- Master of Arts in Business and Professional Communication
- Bachelor of Science in Management
- Bachelor of Science in Health & Human Performance

Step 2 - Interviews

Step 2 involved conducting interviews with the respective programs' directors for the programs identified above. Online and face-to-face programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels were initially included from each of the three colleges at the university. Due to health issues related to one of the college's program directors, the interviews included directors from just two of the colleges. The RC developed a set of 10 interview questions (see Appendix A) to guide conversations with the responsible program directors (PD). An invitation was emailed to each of the five PDs along with the interview questions. Interviews with each PD were conducted via Zoom throughout the months of August to October 2022. Committee members' notes were collected in Microsoft Teams and themes, tactics, and recommendations for each were documented.

As illustrated through the following examples, the findings of the RC were clearly aligned with previous internal findings, research, and best practices on persistence and retention. Findings and observations were placed into four categories:

1. Adjuncts – PDs spending time with adjuncts; careful selection of adjuncts; ongoing

- training, coaching, and mentoring.
2. Engagement – Faculty (full-time and adjuncts) connecting with students using various formats/technology and providing timely, constructive feedback on assignments.
 3. Communication – Provide clear and explicit communication with students and faculty.
 4. Curriculum – Real Learning for Real Life©; presenting practical and experiential content that is easily related to students' careers and interests. Create a pathway for application in the real world.

Additional details regarding findings from the interview are included in Appendix B.

Step 3 – Making Recommendations

Step 3 involved making recommendations for changes and improvements based on the information ascertained throughout the whole process. The roadmap for designing a process for assessing persistence and retention rates is derived from the assessment and measurement of student data, itself, therefore, the application of such processes stems from the methods in which persistence and retention data were gathered, resulting in a pragmatic guide for further examination of student trends and the identification of recommendations, including curriculum design and development to enhance persistence and retention rates and student engagement in their learning.

Throughout the data collection process, as previously described, several common themes were identified. As BU continues to work toward more strategic, university-wide retention-thinking and action, informed by evidence-based practices to promote student success, the following six (6) recommendations support the broader strategic initiatives and goals:

Recommendation 1

Consider combining the findings of this report with the Design & Development department's ACTIVE framework to inform and guide holistic course and syllabus redesign. ACTIVE is an acronym for:

- Alignment of curriculum
- Clarity of the student journey
- Tools & technology that enable learning
- Inclusive/Universal design
- Variation in instructional strategies and assessment
- Engaging content that is meaningful and relevant

Recommendation 2

Integrate Quality Matters standards with those of the Design & Development department's ACTIVE framework. When redesigning new course development standards, Quality Matters will play a significant role in the planning and implementation of new curriculum design that may improve overall student engagement, learning, persistence and retention.

Recommendation 3

Create a repository of evidence-based strategies in collaboration with the Faculty Resources department and the BU Library. These resources should show how the strategies connect to/are aligned with improving student persistence and retention; in other words, resources related to improving student persistence and retention should be clearly connected/aligned with other university-based initiatives as well as be engaging and easily accessible by all faculty. They should go beyond "what" to do and include examples of "how" to use the strategies. These resources should have a mechanism for faculty to suggest the addition of new programs, new courses, new content, new assignments, and new ways of engaging students as they encounter and create evidence-based strategies for subsequent improvement in retention and persistence.

Recommendation 4

Adding a tangible program outcome to the annual program review reports will add awareness to the impact that faculty and curriculum have on the persistence, retention, and graduation trends of students in their respective programs. Pedagogical changes may result in positive outcomes for students. Documentation adds to the accountability for implementing change initiatives, making it possible to further identify trends and track success.

Recommendation 5

Encouraging risk-taking and innovation, and then learning from mistakes and achievements, is a part of Bellevue University's culture. As an institution, BU is a leader in providing excellence in teaching and learning. As such, fostering a continuing culture of risk-taking and trying something new is embedded in its daily operations and strategy. Working to improve student engagement, persistence and retention rates should be part of that culture and all faculty and staff should be encouraged to look well beyond the status quo.

Recommendation 6

Formalizing a process helps to ensure commitment and accountability to that process. By integrating expectations for implementing changes in course delivery and student engagement into formal faculty review processes such as annual statements of work (faculty contracts) and performance reviews, the likelihood that new tactics and strategies for improving student success becomes more probable. Encouraging faculty to take steps to enhance their courses and develop new strategies for teaching and learning will further enhance students' experiences.

Additional Insights Gained Post-Analysis

In addition to the recommendations above, several changes to two (2) academic programs that were NOT considered in the exceptional category were reported while engaging in the university initiative. Some of these changes included:

- Establishing quarterly adjunct faculty meetings.
- Hosting guest speakers in classes.
- Scheduling weekly Zoom meetings for students in courses with high drop rates.
- Providing additional positive and constructive feedback on students' assignments.
- Creating a matriculation video, which encourages students to consider enrolling in their graduate degree.
- Adding persistence and retention assessment data into annual program reviews.
- Integrating more videos into discussion boards, announcements and student feedback.
- Providing additional information including videos and weblinks to professional organizations with student memberships.

Assessing Student Retention and Persistence for Accreditation Purposes

BU's programs are accredited with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Reporting on student graduation and persistence is required for accreditation. Requirements include having defined goals for retention, persistence, and completion that are ambitious but attainable; collecting and analyzing information on these data; and using this information to make improvements. This committee's work and final report is included in the current HLC reaccreditation activities currently being undertaken.

Conclusion

This paper provided a step-wise procedure for analyzing persistence and retention data for purposes of designing innovative tactics and strategies for improving student engagement and success. Academicians and practitioners in higher education institutions may use this work as a roadmap/template

for designing their own internal analysis. Through the analysis of best practices centered on examining persistence and retention rates, BU effectively assessed several exemplary academic programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, using online and face-to-face delivery, which have demonstrated success in supporting students through the entirety of their respective programs. Identified best practices included four (4) areas of focus including adjunct faculty development, faculty engagement, communication and curriculum design. Recommendations for continuous improvement and strategic initiatives were supported by previous research in areas such as persistence and retention, student engagement, faculty involvement and community belongingness. In addition, internal analysis using persistence and retention data and interview responses also supported further initiatives designed to enhance student retention, persistence, and subsequent matriculation to graduation. Future projects should focus on the pragmatic analysis and implementation of processes with the intent of positively impacting student outcomes.

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Tables

Table 1. *Master of Science in Organizational Performance Persistence and Retention Rates*

Format	3rd Term Persistence	1 Year Retention
Graduate Cohort	87.84% AY18-19 to AY20-21	82.43% AY18-19 to AY20-21

Table 2. *Bachelor of Science in Management of Human Resources Persistence and Retention Rates*

Format	3rd Term Persistence	1 Year Retention
Undergraduate Cohort	75.50% AY18-19 to AY20-21	69.23% AY18-19 to AY20-21

Table 3. *Master of Arts in Business and Professional Communication Persistence and Retention Rates*

Format	3rd Term Persistence	1 Year Retention
Graduate; Traditional 12-week terms	70.83% AY18-19 to AY20-21	65.97% AY18-19 to AY20-21

Table 4. *Bachelor of Science in Management Persistence and Retention Rates*

Format	3rd Term Persistence	1 Year Retention
Undergraduate Cohort	78.35% AY18-19 to AY20-21	68.04% AY18-19 to AY20-21

Table 5. *Bachelor of Science in Health & Human Performance Persistence and Retention Rates*

Format	3rd Term Persistence	1 Year Retention
Undergraduate; Traditional 12-week terms	76.79% AY18-19 to AY20-21	67.86% AY18-19 to AY20-21

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. You have exceptionally high retention and graduation rates for your program. To what can you attribute this?
2. What purposeful actions do you take to ensure that your classroom (in-person or virtual) is a safe, inclusive environment?
3. In what ways and when do you communicate with your students? How often?
4. In what ways and when do students communicate with you? How often?
5. What do you do to engage students and establish appropriate relationships with students that other faculty could emulate?
6. Are there specific courses in your program where extra attention or support is needed and offered to students to help them be successful in your program? If so, please explain.
7. How do you as a program director, individual faculty or adjunct faculty encourage students to stay with the program? Do you explicitly state that you want students to stay in the program? Do you think this positively affects the students' intent to graduate?
8. With which BU services do you collaborate to provide additional support to students with the intent of helping them progress through your program? Examples include financial aid, enrollment, advising, the Writing Center, and the BU library.
9. What general practices have you used that did not improve or maintain student engagement and retention?
10. What plans do you have to improve your retention and graduation rates?

Appendix B

Additional Interview Findings

Adjuncts

- Make sure adjuncts and instructors are a good fit for the course and students.
- Make sure adjuncts and instructors share the vision and values of the Program Director.
- Train and mentor adjuncts and maintain a regular schedule of training and mentoring.
- Use adjuncts in advisory boards.
- Empower adjuncts to deal with student issues.
- Empower adjuncts to adapt or change some course content when appropriate.
- Adjuncts are working in their fields and may have unmatched value and experience.
- Adjuncts need good communication and conflict skills.
- Include emotional intelligence training for adjuncts.
- Engage adjuncts regularly regarding feedback on grading, discussions, student engagement, etc.

Engagement

- Become familiar with students' background and interests (as much as possible).
- Use video messages to students for grading, discussions, announcements, and other messages. Students want to see a face.
- Engage in discussion boards.
- Focus on individual students when necessary for continued support.
- Engaging frequently and on a personal level is easier to do with residential classes.
- Reach out to each student early and often.
- Connect on multiple channels – Use video, phone, Teams, Zoom, discussion boards, etc.
- Help students succeed, even outside their academic major.
- Quick turnaround on grading and feedback.
- Conduct status checkpoints for students – How is it really going? Do you need anything? What do you need help with?

Communication

- Reach out to students early and often.
- Honest, constructive, straight-forward delivery in all communications.
- Weekly announcements with course and university information.
- Establish open and honest relationships between faculty and students.
- Engage with adjuncts regularly – Include feedback on grading, student engagement, etc.

Curriculum

- Teach practical skills for the field; encourage critical thinking through varied assignments.
- Include current issues that are not in textbooks. This is a good value-add.
- Create a balance between textbook information and real-world experience.
- Present career-focused content – How to get into field; what to expect; negative aspects of career choices.
- Provide flexible, uncomplicated, and consistent program structure.
- Leverage alumni.
- Some classes have a culminating project throughout a course that stair-steps to the project's completion vs. some that have heavy, culminating writing exercises.
- From day one, the student's career should be the focus.
- Offer an alternative to discussion boards and other assignments; for example, have

students post videos.

- Offer virtual study halls.
- Use more videos in online classes for instruction and feedback as well as for alternatives for student assignments.
- Explain to students the ‘why’ of learning critical thinking skills.
- Use adjuncts for curriculum and content when building a course/program.
- Request feedback from adjuncts on assignments, grading procedures, and content.
- Counsel students on actions they can take while getting their degree, i.e., internships, volunteering, certifications, etc.
- Need balance between textbook information and real-world experience.