# FACULTY FOCUS

# Special Report

# Strategies for Increasing Online Student Retention and Satisfaction.

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**DISTANCE** education
Report

# Strategies for Increasing Online Student Retention and Satisfaction

Despite the tremendous growth of distance education, retention remains its Achilles' heel. Estimates of the failed retention rate for distance education undergraduates range from 20 to 50 percent. Distance education administrators believe the failed retention rate for online courses may be 10 to 20 percent higher than for face-to-face courses.

As an increasing number of colleges and universities identify online education as a critical component to their long-term strategy, the issue of retention can no longer be ignored. It is mandatory for everyone who touches the distance learner to understand why these students leave their online courses, and what it will take to keep them there.

Featuring a collection of top articles from *Distance Education Report*, this new *Faculty Focus* special report provides practical strategies for improving online student retention, engagement and satisfaction. Articles include:
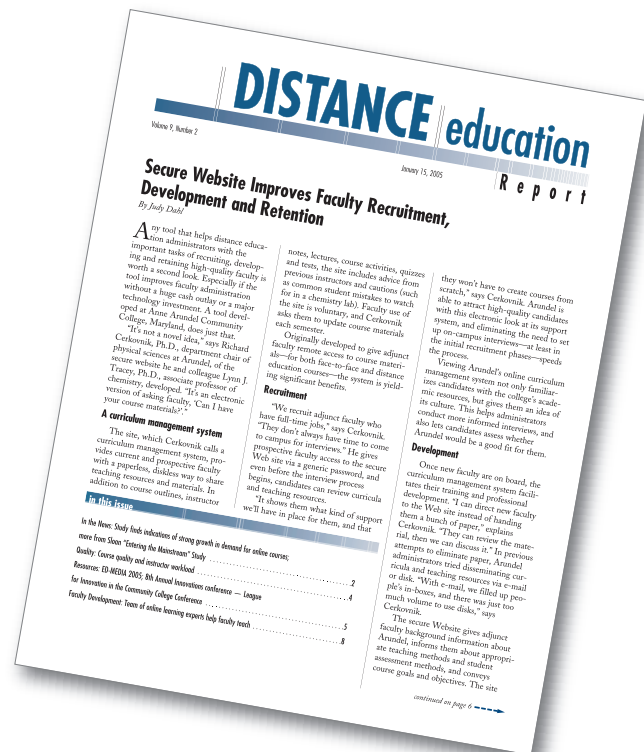- 11 Tips for Improving Retention of Distance Learning Students
- Understanding the Impact of Attrition on Your School
- Taking a Holistic View of Student Retention
- Eight Suggestions to Help You Get Your Retention Act Together Now
- Online Mentoring Builds Retention
- Nine Truths about Recruitment and Retention
- Finding Helpful Patterns in Student Engagement

With the strategic importance of distance education courses on the rise, this report will help you understand the key variables that impact the retention of your web-based students and adopt proactive strategies proven to mitigate potential retention problems.

Christopher Hill
Editor
*Distance Education Report*

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# 11 Tips for Improving Retention of Distance Learning Students

*By Christopher Hill*

Retention remains a knotty problem for distance education. Bob Nash manages instructional design for Coast Learning Systems, a division of Coastline Community College in Fountain Valley, California. He proposes that distance learning retention is a difficult problem because it is "multi-variant" – there is no single cause that can be addressed by a single solution. So instead of a single magic bullet for attrition, he proposes a multi-variant answer – a series of interventions that he has designed that, combined, have had measurable results in increasing student retention.

**1. An "early alert" program.** If a distance learning student hasn't been responding the first few weeks of the course the instructor can pass on the student's name to this automated system. The student then gets an e-mail saying (in Nash's words) "Hey we haven't heard from you for a while – is there anything we can do to help you? Here's some services at the institution that might help you succeed." The instructor follows up with a personal phone call or email.

"Some of our distance learning classes are quite large," Nash says. "Just like a lot of campuses, some of our largest classes are our entry level – psychology, economics. In the larger courses this automated process is very helpful to the instructors who can't pick up the phone each day and call each student."

**2. An online tutoring program.** Coastline instituted a program that included tutors available both on the phone and online, along with other student success services. "Those student who used it succeeded at higher rates than their peer group," Nash says.

**3. More tutoring.** "It's unlikely that just offering online tutoring is going to put a major dent in the problem," Nash says. But offering distance learning tutoring plus offering a distance learning success course, plus the early alert system, plus making many traditional student services available to online learners is beginning to create the kind of multi-variant response to the multi-variant problem that Nash talks about.

Successful upperclass majors from four year colleges were hired to provide tutoring to Coastline students. Students would enter the program either by requesting help or on a referral from one of their professors. Students could get their tutoring face-to-face, on the phone, or online.

**4. A student success course.** "I would recommend a student orientation or a student success course," says Nash. Coastline developed a three-unit student success course, called "Mastering the College Experience," teaching learning skills, "life skills" and various aspects of college orientation. Enrollments are good and, in surveys, students have reported they feel more prepared to succeed after having taken it. "I've been hounding our research department so that we could measure the success of those students relative to the students who did not take the course," Nash says.

Students watch segments on their local PBS station or they get a video or DVD copy. They have a student guide and a textbook that goes along with the course, called Becoming a Master Student. "It's one of the leading student success textbooks," Nash says.

**5. Learning communities.** Nash calls this the tactic that has produced the best student retention rates. "The research recommends [learning communities] again and again," says Nash. Coastline's STAR Program is a group of cohorts that move through a program together. It's an accelerated program so that students get their associate's degree in eighteen months instead of two years. Classes are smaller and hybrid-style, split about evenly between face-to-face and online. "Just like the research tell us, it works very well," says Nash. "The retention numbers in that group are very high." The only drawback is it's not a scalable solution. To be effective, class numbers have to be kept down, keeping the cost per student high.

**6. Peer tutoring.** One of Coastline's sister schools offers a course-specific peer tutor program. Students who did well in a course the previous year are hired by an instructor to be a peer tutor in the course in the present term. The peer tutors help with specific assignments, answer frequently asked questions, and take care of basic student needs in order to free up the instructor's time.

**7. Introduction to distance learning.** "The first hurdle for distance students is technology," Nash says. Introduction To Distance Learning teaches the means and methodology

of distance learning and the terms. "We make sure that they know how to send an email with an attachment, and they know how to download that attachment," says Nash. Basically a best-practices for new online students, the course teaches them things like how to use a discussion board as well as the protocol for using a discussion board; it spends some time teaching them how to interact with their fellow students and their instructor.

**8. Metrics.** Nash points out that while a lot of schools are diligent about measuring their enrollment – measuring as often as two or three times every term – they measure course completion rates and persistence rates perhaps every three years. "If it's important, measure it," says Nash. "Measure as much as you can as often as you can." He mentions individual course completion rates, persistence, students continuing from one year to the next, and student satisfaction rates. "Measure it all and share it," he says. "Share it frequently and that will send a signal that this is important. It is important."

**9. Focus on individual courses.** Spotlight the ones that have the biggest problem with attrition. Focus on those while measuring results against the baseline. Pay attention to both the differences in course completion rates and the cost and resources it took to get there. Do a cost-benefit analysis, measuring return on investment.

**10. Read the research.** Keep a finger on the pulse of the research going on in the field. Nash especially recommends keeping tabs on the first year experience group at the University of South Carolina.(www.sc.edu/fye) They have a number of publications and best practice documents as well as a listserv. Much research on retention is based on traditional face-to-face programs. But, Nash says, part of the challenge of running a distance program is to translate the benefits of that research into the distance learning environment.

**11. Involve faculty.** They are the key service providers. They should be involved in the needs assessment and in the planning because they're going to have to implement it. You need their buy-in and advice, Nash advises. ●

# Understanding the Impact of Attrition on Your School

*By Najmuddin Shaik PhD*

If you're involved in online learning, no doubt you're aware of attrition. Maybe it's just a vague feeling that you're losing more people than you should, or perhaps you're curious about what a high attrition rate could do to your reputation or bottom line.

Whatever the case, revenue loss from attrition is a very real issue. Fortunately, there are a number of resources that will help provide clarity on issues around student attrition and the impact on your school.

According to a study by Vincent Tinto, the retention rate in the United States between 1880 and 1980 was around 55%, which is marginally higher than the rate in other countries for the same period. The 2001 Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange study found the second year retention rate of 80% for member institutions, 87% for institutions with average SAT scores above 1100, and 69% for institutions with SAT scores below 990. A number of studies report that about 50% of students entering two-year colleges and 30% of students entering four-year collegiate institutions leave at the end of their first year.

The attrition rates for distance learning programs are generally 10 to 20 percent higher than the traditional site-based counterparts. Most management has become concerned about the high rate of student attrition and no longer doubts the significance of retention as a strategic issue. A number of federal, state, and private agencies request institution data on retention -- an indicator of a growing interest in this issue. The Higher Education Act of 1992 mandates all institutions that participate in any federal student financial assistance program authorized by Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 to provide retention data.

Retention data is being used as an indicator of academic quality in the U.S. News and World Report annual college

rankings. Even though the methodology of the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings is controversial, administrators realize that that low rankings combined with low retention rates raise questions about the quality and credibility of the institution and if not addressed can have serious consequences. Research over the last 50-years has enriched our understanding of the causes and significance of student retention yet retention rates have not improved significantly. It is frustrating and disheartening to both the research community and institutional management. A number of strategies have been proposed to overcome the challenges of information flow between researchers and the key stakeholders, to effectively communicate the significance of retention to the key institutional decision-makers. Among the suggestions have been an evaluation matrix, use of graphics, multiple institutional comparisons, short issue-specific reports, and a case study approach (see Filkins, Kehoe, & McLaughlin, 2001 for details).

Low student retention results in a significant loss of revenue to the institution and has the potential to impact its financial health and survival. A marginal increase in student retention can result in a significant gain in revenue to the institution. Researchers should therefore consider communicating the issue of student retention in terms of a financial model. The loss of revenue or cost model can be analyzed from an individual, institutional, or societal perspective.

Gouws & Wolmarans propose the use of quality cost control principles to determine the cost of student attrition from a societal perspective. This approach places a heavy demand on the data, which is not easily available. Again, it is also difficult to communicate the significance of retention to institutional management. A simpler and more effective communication strategy is to use a conventional accounting framework to estimate the cost or lost revenue. Noel-Levitz presents the issue of student attrition in terms of lost tuition revenues based on the "Retention Revenue Estimator" template for 2-year, 4-year, and proprietary institutions. Noel-Levitz demonstrates that a public institution in the U.S. with 2000 freshman enrollment and a dropout rate of 30% can save $1 million for a 10% increase in retention.

Lowe, Pinegar, & Shaik (2006) estimate the potential loss of revenue and the cost of student attrition with data from a small private online distance learning institution. Based on monthly course rosters data they estimated the total enrollments for 2005 to be 909. To estimate the number of student withdrawals for each quarter, they selected students who withdrew from the course after the last date to drop from a course without any financial penalty. Out of the total enrollment of 909 students for the 2005 academic year, 496 students (54% retention) maintained active enrollment status and 418 students (46%) withdrew from the courses.

The total revenue estimate for 2005 came to $7.02 million dollars. Total expenses for the 2005 academic year were estimated as a percentage of the total revenue. See Chart 1.

**Chart 1**

| 2005 Expenses (by Category) | Million $ | % of Revenue |
|---|---|---|
| Academic | $ 2.6 M | 37.1% |
| Administrative | $ 2.1 M | 30.0% |
| Admissions | $ 0.39 M | 5.6% |
| Marketing / Advertising | $ 0.87 M | 12.5% |
| Student Services | $ 0.11 M | 1.6% |
| Total Expenses (as % of revenue) | $ 6.1 M | 86.8% |

The per student average expense after accounting for the 491 withdrawals ($6.1 M / 491) is estimated to be $12,400. If there are no withdrawals so that all the 909 students continued with the program ($6.1 M / 909) then the per student average expense is $6,700.

At this institution they found that students on average enroll in 3 courses for a total of 12 credit hours generating a per student total revenue ($300/hr x 12 credit hours) of $3,600. They estimated the potential loss of student revenue stream based on the total withdrawals for the quarter. For the 2005 academic year a total of 418 withdrawals resulted in a loss of 2 million dollars in potential revenue to the institution. See Chart 2.

**Chart 2**

| Quarter | Total Revenue Withdrawals | Revenue Loss for Quarters | Potential Loss of Revenue (1,000 $) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Q1 – Winter 05 | 83 | 3 | 900 K |
| Q2 – Spring 05 | 100 | 2 | 700 K |
| Q3 – Summer 05 | 76 | 1 | 300 K |
| Q4 – Fall 05 | 159 | 0 | |
| 2005 Year | 418 | (48%) | 2.0 M |

The data from the financial framework when combined with assessment data from service quality instrument such as DL_sQUAL (Shaik, Lowe & Pinegar, 2006) will facilitate the development of targeted interventions to increase student retention. Using a simple financial (accounting) framework it is possible to present a realistic picture of the potential effect of student attrition to the key institutional decision-makers.

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# Taking a Holistic View of Student Retention

*By Christopher Hill*

Distance education has opened up opportunities for more nontraditional students than ever. With this increase in nontraditional students and the growing use of online course delivery methods comes a need to develop student retention strategies that are tailored to these students' experiences, which often are quite different from those of traditional-age students in face-to-face settings.

To better understand her institution's student retention efforts, and to begin looking for ways to improve practices, Linzi Kemp, area coordinator for business management and economics at the State University of New York, Empire State College, conducted a workshop within the Center for Distance Learning, which involved faculty, student services professionals, and instructional technologists and which took a holistic look at practices at Empire State that affect student retention. Kemp found this to be an important exercise because much of the research on student retention relates to traditional students, while the average age of students at Empire State is 36, and they often take much longer than four years to complete a bachelor's degree.

## Rating retention practices

Kemp and her colleagues looked at existing practices that affect student retention and put them into the following categories to help decide how to allocate resources for retention efforts and to find areas that needed improvement:

- Star — Practices that need investment (time/money) to retain students. These included a student community that supports learning, student orientation and services, and instructor/mentor (adviser) training support.
- Cash cow — Established and successful practices that retain students. These included open admission, good mentoring, timely personal attention to students, perception of quality online courses and instruction, affordable tuition, small classes, and flexibility.
- Question mark — Practices may or may not retain students. These included unsupervised student discussion, Web-only courses, and group contacts versus individualized contacts with students.
- Dog — Practices that don't retain students. These included asynchronous-only technology, incorrect or misleading information, unfriendly Web site, inadequate instructor technology skills, and transfer credit confusion.

Kemp says. "Every person that the student is coming in contact with, and every engagement the student has with the process, can retain students or cause students to give up. I think in any situation we need to consider that the student is dealing

with many different people in many different departments, and rather than seeing those as separate people in separate departments, we need to understand that the students' experience is the one unifying thing for the college and that people within the college need to exchange ideas and considerations and come together to see the students as a whole, rather than as a set of separate parts that we do things to — trying to form a community of people within the college that supports students."

Kemp also has looked at retention within individual courses and has found that the role of student mentors (academic advisers) is critical. One practice that Kemp has found to help is monitoring student participation and, when necessary, engaging the student in a three-way conversation with the instructor and mentor. The mentor plays an important role because often he or she knows more about what is going on in that individual adult student's life than the instructor, Kemp says. ●

# Reducing the Risk: Effects of a First Year Experience Course for Non-Traditional Students

*By Jennifer Patterson Lorenzetti*

I t comes as no surprise to those who work with distance learning populations to hear that these students are typically dealing with different challenges than are their traditional-age, on-campus peers. According to the most recent National Survey of Student Engagement, distance education students are typically older, work many hours a week, and are often supporting families. However, this very profile can place these students at risk for not continuing in their studies or for not being successful.

The typical first line remedy to aid student success has been a first year experience program. These programs, which often include some sort of "University 101" course tailored to assisting students in their pursuit of success, have a well-established track record boosting persistence and academic standing of the students who enroll. Since the 1972 creation of the first such program at the University of South Carolina, continual evaluation has shown the worth of these programs in increasing retention and improving academic performance. The original target of these programs, traditional-aged on-campus students, has clearly been well served. However, comparable studies have not been done to examine the utility of these programs for non-traditional students, a population that often overlaps closely with the distance education student population.

Seeing a gap in the literature, Sherry Miller Brown, director of the McCarl Nontraditional Student Success Center at the University of Pittsburgh, set out to learn if a first year experience class would help her university's non-traditional students overcome some of the barriers to their success. Her research points to the utility of a first year experience program tailored to the needs of these particular student populations.

## Reading the Literature, Constructing the Course

Brown's work began in 2002, when she raised close to $1 million for the university to open the McCarl Nontraditional Student Success Center. This center is staffed with academic advisors, career counselors, and other professionals dedicated to helping the non-traditional student stay in school successfully.

Right away, she noticed a problem that academic advisors across institutional boundaries will find familiar: the lack of time to spend with students who need it most. "Advisors in our field have much higher case loads," she said, explaining that it is not unusual for an advisor to have a single hour each semester with each student, regardless of how difficult the student is finding their college experience. "It is so hard to explain to people how hard it is to be a non-traditional student," she says.

Brown was also concerned by the statistics that were available in the literature, such as the estimate that some 50 percent of non-traditional/adult students will leave college without earning a degree, compared to 12 percent of traditional

age students. Additionally, 27 percent of non-traditional students will drop out in their first year, nearly twice the rate of traditional students. (Both statistics are from The Condition of Education, 2002).

To address these high rates of non-traditional student vulnerability, Brown wrote a first year experience course targeted at this specific population. The course is taught primarily by the center's academic advisors, giving them an additional hour each week with their students. The primary goals of the course includes development of academic and career goals; familiarity with university resources; recognition of responsibility of the student for his or her own education; recognition of diversity of backgrounds and viewpoints among other students; familiarity with the university environment; and exploration of each student's interest and abilities.

The course reflects the unique needs and challenges of the non-traditional students as they interact with the university, in keeping with the flexibility of the first year experience approach. Brown notes that of the 18 colleges at the University of Pittsburgh, "each one does first year experience differently." In the case of the non-traditional student, differences includes teaching the students how to access university resources when certain offices are not physically open to students who are only available on weekends or during evenings. The course also addresses some more traditional learning skills for success, like memorizing, note-taking, and critical reading.

During the first semester of the course, academic advisors identified 55 students considered "at-risk," and asked them to take the first year experience course. These students were selected on the basis of GED scores, lack of previous college experience,

community college QPA averages below 2.5, or evidence of attrition at more than two colleges. Of those invited into the course, 32 accepted and 23 declined.

Although Brown acknowledges a bias that may have come from self-selection into the course, she believes the dramatic difference in success between those who took the course and those who did not speaks for

> Although Brown acknowledges a bias that may have come from self-selection into the course, she believes the dramatic difference in success between those who took the course and those who did not speaks for itself.

itself. After completing three semesters, an impressive 88 percent of the experimental group of students who took the course were still enrolled, versus only 26 percent of the control group who did not take the course.

Equally impressive are the QPA scores for the two groups. After three semesters, the mean term QPA for the experimental group was 2.69, a full point above the 1.96 mean for the control group. At the same point, some 76 percent of the experimental group had a QPA above 2.00 for the fall 2005 term, compared with 33 percent of the control group.

## Hints for distance education

Although initial research clearly indicates the first year experience course for non-traditional students is a success, Brown plans to continue

monitoring the program through other research activities. For example, Brown says, "this fall we'll look at different populations of students, [like] students who transfer from community colleges." She already knows from the data that students who transfer to the university from community colleges often see a dramatic drop in their QPA average for the first couple of terms. "Usually by graduation they will be close to where they entered," she says. However, the dramatic drop before rebounding is when these students are in the biggest danger of dropping out.

Brown believes the first year experience program could be adapted to foster success and retention in the distance education population, and she has some advice for those attempting to construct an all-distance version. "In order to have a successful program, find a way to do real outreach," she says. She emphasizes the importance of these students having continual, personal attention from the university, and the tools to assist with this are commonly available. "It is really important to have discussion boards so you can talk back and forth. Personalize it as much as possible," she says.

She expresses concern that distance education programs may neglect to focus adequately on student services and student development for this population, and she urges administrators to continue to find ways that these students can remain in contact with the staff when needed and receive prompt responses to requests for assistance. "You have to provide outreach to your students. Find ways to connect to them [with] not just a link or a web page," she says. ●

# Eight Suggestions to Help You Get Your Retention Act Together Now

*By Christopher Hill*

Retention remains the Achilles' heel of distance education. Estimates of the failed retention rate for distance education undergraduates range from 20 to 50 percent. Distance education administrators believe the failed retention rate for online courses may be 10 to 20% higher than for face-to-face courses.

Colleges and universities today are under pressure to accommodate larger and larger percentages of the population. Distance education is central to that mission. That makes retention a crucial issue for post-secondary institutions. It has become mandatory to understand why students leave their online courses, and what will keep them there.

Michael Herbert, Chair of the Criminal Justice Department at Bemidji State University, holds a Ph.D. in teaching and learning from the University of North Dakota and developed the first online courses in his department. He serves as an online faculty mentor and is on the University's Center for Extended Learning Committee, which oversees the administration of distance courses. He recently completed a study of retention at his institution. In an email interview he gave eight insights he gained during the course of his study.

**1. Students need to feel integrated into the program and the institution.** Research has shown that responsiveness to student's needs is a critical variable in terms of retention. A sense of belonging as a student, whether traditional or distance learner, has been shown to be an important aspect in retention, and re-

> A sense of belonging as a student, whether traditional or distance learner, has been shown to be an important aspect in retention, and responsiveness to student's needs is a large determinant in a student feeling like they are part of a course or an institution.

sponsiveness to student's needs is a large determinant in a student feeling like they are part of a course or an institution. Intuitively we can assume that if students are not engaged and do not perceive themselves as an integral part of their environment they will likely choose to leave that environment and seek one where their needs are met.

**2. Pedagogy and instructor training affect retention.** There is a huge (and flawed) assumption that professors who teach on-campus courses can automatically do a good job

teaching online courses. Teaching online has its own very distinct set of instructor skills that are essential for an online course to be successful. While online instruction may not have its own separate pedagogy, those professors who teach well in the traditional (on-campus) setting need to add to their skill set those additional unique skills required for a successful online course. So in that sense it may not be a matter of developing a separate pedagogy for online teaching, but expanding those traditional teaching skills with resources that allow an effective transition between on-campus and online course delivery.

**3. Family obligations affect retention.** If we look at retention in terms of categories of variables, the most commonly used categories are a) personal variables, b) institutional variables and c) circumstantial variables. With that noted, family obligations would fall under the personal variable category and while my research did not specifically delineate family obligations as a separate response, most research would indicate that family obligations would certainly have an impact on retention for several reasons. These may include the sharing of household responsibilities, having access to the household computer, and those additional personal responsibilities that are associated with caring for a spouse/significant other and any children or other family members in cases where the student is responsible for the care of an elderly parent or relative.

**4. Support affects retention.** There are two distinct types of support. The first would be that level of support (or the lack thereof) the student receives from outside of the institu-

tion. Those sources would be employers, family and significant others. From an institutional perspective, important variables include student support services; which would include tech support, financial aid, and instructional support.

Institutions must have in place not only the mechanisms to adequately respond to student's needs, but must also have the supporting resources

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available to make those mechanisms operate in a timely fashion. For example, it would not suffice to have a computer technical support desk that is only open during normal university hours. Most online students are working during non-traditional times and may need support in the evenings or on weekends. With that said, the resources (in this case staffing) must be made available to meet the unique needs of distance learners.

**5. Interaction between students and the institution affects retention.** The student experience with online courses starts long before they first log onto the internet and sign into

the class. Students may have contact with numerous campus offices long before they log into class for the first time. The ease with which they can register for the class, information received prior to the start of class, associated costs and start-up information (how to log on, course requirements and the like) play an important role in getting students off on the right foot. We need to recognize that there are many people who have a direct impact on the student's online learning experience. From the admissions office to financial aid to computer support all need to understand how they play an important role regarding online learners.

**6. Students satisfaction with the institutional environment affects retention.**

The most important institutional variable that students reported in my research were that of faculty being responsive to student needs, followed by the institution responding quickly to requested information and thirdly, by faculty providing timely feedback about student progress. What was interesting was that when measuring student variables in terms of both importance and satisfaction, the following top four variables were the same in both categories:
- faculty responsiveness
- quality of online instruction
- timely feedback
- institutional response time to requests for information.

**7. Student variables affect retention.** The only variable in my study to have statistical significance was that which asked if the students' online experience had met their expectation. Those students who did not retain their online course had a statistically lower mean score than those who had retained their online course. So what we may glean from this is that

all of those variables, both organizational and institutional, combine to create that overall experience of meeting a student's online course expectations. The less those expectations are met, the less likely those students are going to successfully retain their course.

**8. There are best practices that can affect retention.** Consistently what comes through in research is that engaging students and making them a part of the learning experience is critical for success. From an instructional perspective, professors who are actively engaging learners have much more success with student retention. By utilizing those resources available in online instruction in terms of engaging students and building that sense of community, faculty can be better able to meet student's expectations. Holding synchronous chat sessions, asynchronous discussion boards, group projects, and having the students moderating course discussions are just some ways in which online students can become engaged. This is not to say that the foundations are not created by the faculty member. As experienced faculty know, the best-run courses are those in which the faculty member may look like a duck leisurely gliding across the lake, while underneath those webbed feet are paddling like mad. ●

# Online Mentoring Builds Retention

*By Christopher Hill*

Research has shown that personal contact is one of the keys to retention in distance education. Relationships with other students are helpful, and relationships with instructors are even better. But having one person dedicated to the students' success and on hand to help them at each turn is better yet. Janet Truluck, Coordinator of the Online Master's of Adult Education Degree Program at the University of Georgia has developed that idea into a mentoring system that offers the student one person that the students know they can come to with problems, who maintains contact with them throughout the degree program. It's a system that appears to be successful in keeping students in the program and improving the quality of their experience while in it.

"A lot of the research talks about attrition in online programs, how it's really hard to keep students in the program," says Truluck, noting that it can work differently with systematic mentoring,.

The most important thing, Truluck and her colleagues determined, was to have a point person in whom the mentoring functions are centered. Dedicated to the cohort as they moved through, she could become familiar with and to the students. "I'm here for the students whenever there's an issue that comes up. It always gives them the feeling that they're not just out there in cyberspace somewhere doing this on their own, that there's somebody here who actually knows abut them and who they are and what

they're doing and what they're trying to accomplish," Truluck says.

There are seven basic components of Truluck's online mentoring practice:
1. Telephone each student prior to the beginning of the program.
2. The coordinator should teach one of the first courses in the program.
3. Open a "coffee shop" in each course
4. Use the tools in WebCT to establish an instructional relationship.
5. Establish "virtual" office hours.
6. Telephone students again mid-semester.
7. Conduct a final exit interview.

**1. The initial phone call to each student.** Truluck begins to establish a personal connection with each student in a phone call to each one before the program begins. Truluck tells them that she will be their advisor throughout the program, that she will follow their progress and will be available if at any time they have questions or issues. Truluck may give examples of the benefits they will receive by obtaining a master's degree. She might discuss their goals and motivation for being in the program.

Truluck gives then an idea of what will be required of them in the program. "I like for them to realize what's involved in the program because it's not an easy thing to do especially if they're working full time and have families and other commitments." Truluck tells them that they're going to have to be good time managers in order for them to be suc-

cessful, and gives them some time management tips. "I try to make sure that they know what they're getting into before they start," she says.

**2. The coordinator should teach one of the first courses in the program.** As an instructor in the program, Truluck also believes that it's important for her to teach one of the first courses that each cohort takes. "They get to know me and I get to know them. And then after that first semester they move on to other people as instructors but they still know that I'm here and I'm their adviser and I will be in touch with them throughout the two years."

Teaching the first, or one of the first courses does a lot, in Truluck's mind, to support and encourage a relationship with the faculty, and her in particular. She can also make the students aware of what the expectations are throughout the program. "We want to encourage students to talk to each other and to us. To take the material that they learn and reflect on it and then come back and have a discussion about it. That is where the learning takes place. Teaching the course gives me the opportunity to make them aware of those expectations."

Since she teaches in the program anyway, coordinates the program, and since she's going to be their adviser, it makes sense to Truluck that she's there at the beginning. She can get a sense of how they're doing academically and/or personally. A significant subset of students get "pretty overwhelmed" at the beginning and Truluck is there to offer help getting over that initial hump.

**3. Open a "coffee shop" in each course.** The "Coffee Shop" is a feature supported by WebCT, a discussion area where students can go to talk about things outside of their coursework. "That's where you can go and

just have casual conversation with other folks," Truluck says. "Like if something's going on in your life and you want to share it with people, you go to the coffee shop." The intent is to build and support camaraderie among the cohort. It often works. "I've had students from time to time who've had things come up in their lives and they say, 'I think I'm going to drop out, I just can't do this,'" says Truluck. "And all the other students will just rally around and they'll say, 'No, no, no, don't do that, we'll help you, we'll do what we can to keep you in here.'

"It's an interesting process to see because when we first started out I had no idea you could form relationships like this without ever having laid eyes on anybody."

**4. Use WebCT tools to reach students.** WebCT has a variety of tools and Truluck finds most of them useful. But the main tools she use with her mentees are the discussion features. That's where the academic work and all the other talk goes on, and this is where Truluck has her Coffee Shop. "I think that helps them feel more comfortable, free to ask questions, or if they have a problem they can go in there and they can either e-mail me or each other," Truluck says.

**5. Establish "virtual" office hours.** Chat rooms are not Truluck's favorite feature, but this is where she holds her office hours. She may say she'll be in the chat room Wednesday from two until three, and if a student has any questions about the course or any questions about the program or any other issues they want to discuss, that's their opportunity. And the students do tend to show up. "Maybe there's been a misunderstanding of the expectations of the course or the program and it gives me the opportu-

nity to encourage them," Truluck says. But the conversations can be fairly wide-ranging. Subjects like what they can do when they finish their degree, potential research partners, among other things, come up.

**6. Telephone students again mid-semester.** At first Truluck wasn't sure whether this was important or not. "You'd think that with all the other contacts it wouldn't matter," she says. But it turned out that the students were very appreciative. Says Truluck: "I think it's because you actually get to talk to somebody. Everything else is written and read and video'd--there's always that distance there. And when you can actually pick up the telephone and talk to someone it's important to them." It's important to Truluck, too. She likes to know how her students are doing—-how the first half of the semester has gone, have they had any problems, was there anything they didn't understand. Mid-term academic evaluations are standard in all the program's courses. So the mid-term phone call complements the academic with an evaluation from the personal side.

**7. Conduct a final exit interview.** A requirement of the master's program is that students have an exit exam and the turn in a portfolio, to be evaluated by a committee. At the end of that process Truluck asks them if they have any suggestions for anything the faculty and administration can do to to make the program better for students. The program's philosophy is that, if at all possible they adopt the suggestions. "If they have suggestions that come out of those exit exams, we implment those changes," Truluck states.

Truluck says they've had some good suggestions from students. She cites as an example a research course scheduled for the second year. The

students suggested it would be helpful to take it earlier in their studies. The program administrators put it in the first year. It has turned out to be a help to the students in understanding research reports and presentations at a valuable early point in the program. "Simple suggestions like that I think make the process better for the students," Truluck says.

Students won't always initiate complaints or suggestions. "We see it from our side," Truluck admits, "and if you don't hear anything you assume everything is fine out there. But if [the students] get the opportunity to say let me think about this and see what I can come up with, they usually come up with something valid." Truluck had one group of students who actually put together a PowerPoint presentation for future students, giving advice on how to organize themselves for the program. "Now I use that for all the new students," Truluck says.

Does Truluck feel that she establishes a relationship with the students who come through the program? Yes, most definitely, she says. She stays in touch with a lot of them. "And they form relationships with each other that are really good to see.

"They don't ever come to campus. The first time we all see each other is at graduation. And that's a lot of fun." ●

# Nine Truths about Recruitment and Retention

*By Christopher Hill*

Recruiting and retaining distance students is as much an art as a science. Gloria Pickar founded the Compass Knowledge Group to help schools, both public and private, build distance education programs and recruit and retain students. From Northwestern and Boston University to tiny Mailhurst University in Portland, Oregon, Compass Knowledge provides recruitment and retention services for 20 distance learning programs. In the process they have derived principles for attracting and keeping those notoriously difficult-to-hold-on-to distance students. Here is some of the fruit of Gloria Pickar's experience.

**1. Retention begins with recruitment.** "One of the worst things you can do on the retention side is to put students in a program who are not qualified," says Pickar. Remember that you're not trying to sell students your program. You're trying to help them understand what the requirements of this program are, whether they meet the qualifications of this program and how this program is going to translate into their career goals.

**2. Recruitment begins with research.** Pickar believes in doing a lot of initial research before you launch a program. Research can tell you what the opportunity is for a viable program. Look at the market place and assess the feasibility of the program. See if you will be serving a particular marketplace need. Remember that most of your online programs will be targeting working professionals and not the standard 18 to 22 year old undergraduate demographic--people who are employed and looking to advance in their careers or change their career.

Pickar says to ask four questions when examining your potential market.

a. What's the size of that audience?
b. What occupations would feed into the profession that this degree is intended for?
c. What's the size of each of those occupation groups?
d. how fast is the degree profession growing?

For example a promising program would have an audience size of at least 100,000. It would prepare students for professions that are growing faster than the average occupational growth rate as defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Currently that is 15 percent annually.

These are things that would push or pull someone into your program. What's the growth rate of that particular degree market; how many degrees are being conferred every year? (This data is readily available to you from the National Center for Educational Statistics http://nces.ed.gov/) If there are only a few hundred degrees that are being conferred nationally in that profession each year, it's unlikely that it would be successful in an online environment. Pickard sets a benchmark of at least 500 degrees conferred in graduate degree programs, 1000 in undergraduate programs.

The second area is what Pickard calls degree demand drivers. Look for things that would make this an attractive program for a particular professional. Is there the opportunity for increased compensation with this degree? What kind of salary differential would there be before and after obtaining the degree? Are there management opportunities or opportunities for promotion? Is the degree needed for licensure in a profession, as is true in clinical laboratory sciences, education, nursing and many of the health professions? Licensure requirements are strong demand drivers.

The third major area to consider is audience accessibility. If you do find out that the audience is large enough, how will you reach them? There may be lists available from professional societies or associations. Find out what journals your prospective students read. Do those journals and magazines have lists available and advertising opportunities? Find out what kind of key words your people use to search for information in their field. What online education directories are there, and what kinds of leads or enquiries are they generating?

The last major area Pickar looks at on the marketplace side is what she calls the competitive landscape-- finding out what how many competitors are there, and who they are and which ones are competitors for your proposed program.

**3. Make an infrastructure assessment.** Talk to your faculty and student service people to help them decide if they have the infrastructure to deliver courses to students at a distance.

a. Do they have online applications and online registration?
b. Can students get textbooks online?
c. Do they have an online library?
d. Do students have 24/7 help desk support?
e. What kind of course management system are they using and is it robust?

**4. Consider the curriculum.** Sit down with the faculty and determine if your program can be delivered in a scalable model. You're not just looking for scalability but also for evidence that retention can be high. Distance programs that are delivered in a completely independent study, self-paced mode have very low retention--typically around 25 percent. Programs that can be delivered in a cohort that has a lot of communication and interaction between students, where there is a lot of student support available, are able to get retention rates of 85 to 90 percent for new students and 99 percent for returning students.

**5. Give students opportunities to apply what they're learning.** A key to retention is having a multi-dimensional instructional experience. Students should not be in a situation where they're just reading content online (Pickar calls this an electronic correspondence course). Have a variety of learning experiences and instructional activities. Having activities where students directly apply what they learn in their workplace can be important. The working professionals that you're teaching are already employed in the field and they work in "laboratories,"--that is, their workplace--every day.

Small group activities and doing projects together, interacting with each other, sharing what they're learning, communicating on a regular basis – these are all things that have a tendency to build a very strong cohort and a lot of cohesiveness in that cohort. Students have a tendency to support each other and not let each other drop out.

**6. Have support systems in place.** Build an instructional delivery model where students get support for the logistical things that can create interfer-ences which can ultimately make students drop out. Someone must be designated to respond to things like "My textbooks didn't arrive" and "I forgot how to submit that assignment" and "I got kicked out of my test last night." Every program should ideally have a fulltime program manager to respond to such needs. That individual provides student and faculty support while the program is being delivered.

**7. Track students on a regular basis.** Simply being in regular communication with students is important. Not only should faculty be in regular communication during their courses but the program manager—the retention specialist—should be available to check on students, and make sure they have the resources they need. Pickar's group starts the tracking process with what they call a learning preparedness assessment. Once someone is registered as a new student, the program manager makes contact with that student, and goes through a checklist to make sure that they have what they need to be ready to start their first course. Do they have their books? Has financial aid been taken care of? Is their computer ready and working? Do they have a high speed connection and if they don't what are they going to do to compensate? Have they gone through the orientation site for their course management system?

Getting things like this in order beforehand can make a big difference in whether or not, when the student opens that first course, they are ready to learn. If not prepared in this way the reaction can be panic and an impulse to drop out. At that point in the cycle, students are typically focused more on simply getting into the program than they are on learning.

**8. Don't overload them.** Pickar recommends what she calls "minimal course sequencing." The idea is that it's better to have two or three courses offered one at a time during the course of a semester, even if the coursework is more intense, than to ask students to take three courses simultaneously over the entire semester. "We find that working professionals do better if they take two or three courses per term but only do one course at a time. You get the same amount of curriculum completed, but typically working professionals have the feeling that they can only take on one more thing at a time. Instead of offering two or three courses simultaneously, for twelve to sixteen weeks, offer one course for six or eight weeks, and the next six to eight weeks offer another course. Do them back to back instead of simultaneously."

**9. Give the students an end in sight.** Structure the delivery of courses so that students can have an end in sight. Think of recruitment as not so much signing students up for courses, as enrolling them in the program. Student advisement should be about the student completing the program, earning the degree or the certificate rather than just enrolling in courses. Help students to look at their work and their personal schedules and see how they're going to complete the program in 18 months if it's a master's degree, two years if it's a bachelor's degree. How are their courses going to fit into a schedule so they can get a sense of what the time-to-degree is. "If they look at it and say, 'OK, I'm only taking one course at a time, I'm taking three courses a year--it could take me ten years to complete,' after they do about two terms they give up. But if you structure it in a way so that they can see that at the end of that 18 month or two year tunnel, I'm going to earn my degree, their stick-to-it-iveness and cohesion is much stronger." ●

# Finding Helpful Patterns in Student Engagement

*By Christopher Hill*

One of the most difficult tasks that your instructors face is keeping students engaged. It's a difficult enough task when you've got the students in front of you face-to face. It's an even more difficult task when the students are distant, given that you have a separation both physical and conceptual between you and them. And perhaps even more challenging is the engagements of students with each other. Fail at engagement and you can have problems of alienation, a lack of commitment and even potentially anti-social behavior. How can you help your instructors understand the phenomenon of engagement? Jim Waters, a PhD candidate at Drexel University, has done some research into the phenomenon of online student engagement that may help your instructors travel this tricky path.

## Patterns of Participation

"What I've found is that there are some interesting patterns," Waters says. One of those patterns is the impact of certain key participants within a community of enquiry. In various studies, Waters has found that although we have an idea of an online community as a kind of participatory democracy it very frequently doesn't work out that way. In fact, instructors often find themselves depending on a core of perhaps 20 percent of the students who are actually responsible for most of the discussion output. "For instance we might be having a great discussion section but when we actually look into it we find that about half the messages are coming from 5 or 6 people," he says. "It's interesting to wonder, why are these people being more attended to, taken more seriously? And what can we do to turn people from relatively passive consumers of knowledge-building to more active participants in the process?"

From the start of his research, Waters was struck by the difference between the people he describes as contributing out of "contractual obligation" -- who will perhaps do the one or two messages a week as required--and the people who consistently post a great deal more and whose messages are receiving a great deal more attention. Waters sought a way of characterizing what made these "thought leaders" different.

At first he looked at some static qualities, like the frequency of postings, the length of the message, the time of the posting, et cetera. In those terms, the students who were being taken more seriously weren't necessarily those who were the most vociferous—they weren't necessarily posting longer, more complicated messages. But quite often they were posting messages relatively early on in the process.

## Finding the Thought Leaders

So one of Waters' key findings for instructors is that, if you have a week-long discussion, it's important to have the impetus started early. For instance, if somebody posts a message in the first one or two days, those messages will be read very much more frequently than if somebody posts a message from day three or beyond. Once you get to the end of the week there's relatively little activity.

What interested Waters was that when he looked at the contributions that these "thought leaders" were making, there was a very heavy bias toward people who could be regarded as facilitating the discourse. These were people who would be very active in making sure that other people contributed. These people were much more frequently attended to and responded to than the rest of their peers.

"With a bit of skill we would generate this rather nice feedback loop where one or two students would start a discussion, somebody would chime in with a facilitatory message and then this would generate more facilitatory type posts."

When the contributions to discussions are broken down statistically, well over half of the contributions are straightforward responses to the instructor posts. About 20 percent of them were message where the students were actually trying to facilitate the discourse. Waters found that those people who basically posted "one-off" responses to the instructor would typically get a very low level of response. For every four messages that they would post, they might get one back. Whereas people who were more active in a facilitatory role would be getting back two or three times as many posts.

In addition to the "contractual obligation" posters, and the "thought leaders," there was an additional category of student. Waters calls these the "complicators", who were trying to reframe the debate. They

often didn't get much response at all, because these were people who were trying to challenge the assumptions of the questions they'd been given. Still, Waters found hope for independent thinking here.

When Waters looked at the first few weeks of a discourse, he found that on the whole students were relatively tentative about challenging the assumptions of the course, and they were relatively tentative about talking to each other. The discourse would be mostly about responding directly to the instructors. "As we got to the last quarter, we would find that the students were much more keen about being a little braver," Waters says. "They would also be responding to each other's posts far more."

Another interesting phenomenon was that although people were talking to each other more, they tended to form into rather well-defined cliques. At the beginning of the course a student might post messages to about 12 or 13 others, but by the end of the course, although the student might be posting more individual messages, they might only be corresponding with three or four different people. This was a fairly consistent pattern. "They were definitely concentrating into some more clique-y behavior," Waters says.

There was a group of about eight students whom Waters considered as being the key participants in the discourse. Waters found that if most of these eight students were involved in discourse, then the group could actually have a "fairly deep, fairly involved thread with a great deal of knowledge construction." If these "thought leaders" weren't active, then the discourse tended to be more flat and linear.

"You start with a very simple level of engagement where the students are simply there," says Waters. "And you get to a point where the students are committed psychologically to the process, actively engaged and focused on the fact that they are committed to a larger global community rather than involving themselves in this very individual knowledge building.

"There's not much we can tell about them personally," says Waters of the "Thought Leaders." "Within the context of the online learners that we know, frequently they were people who had a strong interest in the subject matter, often being professionally involved in the area. They may also be people who had a lot of experience in the process of being part of an online community. Sometimes it was because they knew the debate better. Sometimes it wasn't because they were experts in the debate, but the topic of the discussion had generated sufficient interest in them that they would go out and do more extensive research."

"There's a certain drive that these students have and part of my upcoming research is to see if we can identify anything about these students that makes them want to take on such responsibility. They may just be classic type A personalities, but at present we don't really have anyway of knowing."

## Applying the Research

What can an instructor get out of Waters' research? One key is something that instructors should be doing anyway, which is to monitor how things are going in the discussions very closely. And make sure that the people who are involved in keeping discourse running are suitably rewarded, so they don't feel like they're "speaking to a vacuum." Instructors should keep "a very strong finger on the pulse," Waters says.

"It can be very disheartening when you think you're making strong contributions and you don't get any recognition when you think you're doing something valuable. It's very easy for a student to lose that involvement."

Waters says that it's a tricky line to walk between recognizing contributions and keeping a hands-off stance toward the discussion, which he generally recommends. "You only want to be involved with it when you see something going wrong. I don't necessarily want to force the discussion or force the direction, but you want to make sure it doesn't just peter out into nothing. But in terms of some sort of rubric of how you maintain impetus, we don't have it yet."

"We've found very productive patterns and we've found less productive patterns," Waters says. In some respects Waters has discovered that the difference between good discussion patterns and bad patterns may be as simple as question design. "In some cases we found that if you had questions which were just too complicated, too many conceptual units for the students to deal with, they just wouldn't engage with them, they might answer one of two parts. Whereas if you had a lot of more tightly phrased questions and questions that even if they were open-ended they were relatively finite, we actually got a good deal more discussion." ●

# Service Center: A Strategy to Promote Student Retention

*By Najmuddin Shaik, PhD*

Service Center is a Web-based Student Relationship Management (SRM) application developed by the staff of the Division of Academic Outreach, Office of Continuing Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The goal is to facilitate long-term relationship with students and promote student retention by providing consistent, personalized, quality value-added services to students, faculty, and campus administrative units.

Service Center personalizes the relationship with the students by providing vital information at every point in the interface with the student while maintaining the confidentiality and integrity of data. Information is consolidated to provide a unified view that includes student profile, registrations, courses, reports, requests, inquiries, and business communications. Service Center is a first step in the implementation of Student Relationship Management strategies to promote student retention. It was tested and implemented in August 2004 and has received encouraging reviews from students, academic outreach staff and campus departments.

## Student Relationship Management

Distance education is undergoing radical transformation as a result of advancements in computer technology and changes in the student profile. The Internet has created a new level of competition in distance learning programs with the entry of fast growing dot.com companies who pose a credible challenge to the traditional educational institutions. There is a shift in the composition of student population with a growing proportion of non-traditional students enrolling in the distance learning programs. With a simple click of a button students are able to shop for courses and programs that best accommodate their schedules and learning styles.

Students expect a service-driven value chain encompassing personalized attention, real-time responsiveness and consistent guidance at every touch-point during their stay at the institution. Corporations faced with similar challenges implemented a set of business-process and IT-based enhancements designed to create internal synergy among departments and processes, and optimize the value of all business encounters. These strategies are collectively referred to as customer relationship management (Gray & Byun, 2001; Freeland, 2003).

Academic institutions can benefit from the experiences of corporations by developing similar strategies generally referred to as Student Relationship Management (SRM) (Lemon, 2004). SRM is primarily a strategic business and process issue and the approach is to understand and anticipate the needs of students and collaborating partners. Successful implementation of SRM requires that all processes and the technical solutions be aligned and, at a higher level, synthesized to serve the needs of the students. From the student perspective, effective SRM means providing unique services and learning experiences such that the student wants to be engaged in a long-term relationship with the institution. With such strategic initiatives the institution can recruit and retain students, improve services, reduce costs and improve staff productivity across the institution. Effective SRM requires an enterprise-wide information system to share relevant, consistent, and meaningful student profiles across all student interfaces and touch-points.

## Service Center System Architecture

Academic Outreach is considering implementing SRM strategies. Service Center is the first step towards implementing SRM. Data from the Enterprise Data Warehouse (EDW) of UI-integrate, the University of Illinois enterprise resource planning system (ERPS), is integrated with data from a number of student interfaces and contact points to provide a unified student profile to personalize the relationship with the students.

The computer technology for the Service Center is based on three-tier architecture consisting of the client tier, middle tier, and the data storage tier to facilitate scalability and upgrades. The user interface resides on the client workstation and is responsible for getting data from the user and presenting data to the user. The user interacts through standard browsers such Internet Explorer, Netscape, or Mozilla by sending HTTP/SHTTP requests to the application server. The application logic is on the middle tier and consists of Security Firewall, Microsoft IIS Web Server, and the Application Server.

Security is implemented through the security firewall to prevent unauthorized access to data and system

resources. Additional layer of security is built through the user authentication system. The system is also programmed to accept requests for system resources from trusted ports. The application server hosts the ColdFusion and ASP.NET client-server-side scripting application. The web server manages requests using HTTP protocol connector through the security firewall, performs business logic processing, and sends responses to the client. Data is stored on Microsoft SQL database server.

## Service Center Features

Service Center is designed with a number of features including:
- Web-based user interface
- multilevel security access to ensure privacy and integrity of data
- separate interfaces for Academic Outreach Staff and campus departments
- online registration, tuition and fee assessment, and payments system
- search function to enable searching student and course information
- student profile that includes personal information, address, email, phone, prior college, current term registrations, enrollment history, registration activity log, registration hold, expected graduation date etc, to provide customized assistance
- triggered alert to generate reminders that can be channeled to staff for follow up
- communication tools to enable staff to maintain contacts and track student requests efficiently. Option to send personalized e-mail relating to programs, special events and activities, targeted to individuals or groups of students and program managers (Figure 2: Communication Center)

- library service to students and instructors
- online customized reports with data from EDW and an in-house developed Datamart
- FAQs with updated information on processes
- online tutorials in Camtasia to minimize staff training requirements.

## Service Center and Process Improvements

Service Center facilitates a number of processes. It addresses the challenges faced by staff including but not limited to answering a growing number of e-mail requests, responding to student inquiries and numerous communication efforts.

- Consistent, correct, and updated information across all student interfaces and a policy of gradual elimination of data from stand alone systems
- Standardization and simplification of all processes beginning with enrollment and course registration
- Reduction of manually processed student transactions and elimination of redundant processing of student transactions
- Integration of Academic Outreach web site with the central database to present consistent and correct information
- Unified student profile consisting of
  - demographic information (person details, address, phone, email, prior institution background, registration log).
  - enrollments for the current term, enrollment history, and registration activity logs.
  - service requests – outstanding, closed, and action taken – such as general inquiry, request for general information, application, complaints etc.
  - log of student and staff interactions

- Communication Center configured to assist staff to produce custom letters using student's preferred email accounts and to manage these individually or on a group basis. Enable staff to respond to enquiries in an expedient and efficient manner
- Reports Management to provide a series of reports covering enrollment roster, course listing, financial reports, reports to state and federal agencies
- A system of internal data validation processes to identify inconsistent and missing data.

## Conclusion

Service Center is an attempt by the staff of Academic Outreach to provide quality and meaningful services to students and collaborating university partners to promote student retention. Reviews so far has been very encouraging and positive from both the students and staff. Service Center can provide a significant reduction in cost to serve students and enhance student experiences. When fully implemented, in conjunction with SRM, Service Center will enable staff to turn every interaction into a highly personalized, meaningful student interaction and then forge these interactions into a long-term relationship with the students and make their experience memorable.

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