

College Student Retention: Can it be Improved?

By Cindy P. Veenstra

This issue of *ASQ Higher Education Brief* is dedicated to an important quality topic in higher education: college student retention. With increased pressure for continuous improvement in colleges, more emphasis is being placed on increasing student retention and graduation rates. In the global economy, students who complete undergraduate degrees in their chosen major will enjoy better careers than students who do not complete their undergraduate degrees. College retention is typically measured by the graduation rate. Currently, 36% of U.S. college students graduate in four years and 58% graduate in six years.¹

For the past 30 years, educators have been researching and discussing the reasons for college student attrition and retention. Alexander Astin and Vincent Tinto are recognized as the leaders in establishing theories of student retention. Each has authored books that are considered classics on the theory and practice of student retention.^{2,3} Many of their ideas are central to quality in education concepts. They have discussed the benefits of faculty engaging with students, both in and out of the classroom, and the need for student involvement in college life.

Learning communities

A recent trend is for colleges to invest in freshman learning communities in order to integrate freshmen into the college's culture and improve both learning and retention. For example, Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN, has a living and learning environment with a dedicated freshman campus to help freshmen transition to college life.⁴

Together with these ideas on engagement in the classroom and on campus, there is increased support among faculty for research on teaching and learning. Eventually this research is expected to lead to a higher student-retention rate. The ASQ Education Division is currently supporting a public-access discussion board called Scholarship of Teaching,⁵ and ASQ's Higher Education Community,⁶ a community network designed for faculty members to share their ideas on teaching and curriculum. The division hopes both activities will enable faculty to network more on the scholarship and research of teaching.

Student retention predictors

In the education research literature, major predictors of student retention have included high school preparation, financial need, academic confidence, social engagement and institutional support. An excellent review is presented in the ACT Policy Report, “The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention.”⁷ In my research, academic preparation in high school, confidence and goals established in high school are important for academic success in the first year of college.

When educators discuss quality systems thinking, they mention attributes such as being process-oriented, data-driven, customer-focused and systems-oriented. The structure of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award Education Criteria⁸ represents an excellent example of this.

The following ideas summarize some of my thoughts on these quality system attributes as they pertain to college student retention:

- **Processes:** Align college classroom activities for student success, align admission processes with the learning that is required as a freshman and align the admission processes with scholarship and financial aid processes. Provide for excellent student support services and invest in good placement for the first-year courses.
- **Data-driven:** Understand your students. What are the predictors of success at your college and in your department? Use surveys to gather information and establish student support programs. Then use the data results to refine current policies.
- **Customer-focused:** Engage students in each classroom, provide a strong student support system and, at the same time, excite students about the education they are receiving. Translate the relevancy of the education to potential careers. Design and fund extracurricular activities that enthusiastically support your students’ academic interests and help them to become independent learners.
- **Systems-oriented:** Evaluate whether your academic programs come together to support students in a seamless learning process.

With the implementation of these quality principles, faculty and college administrators can help improve student retention and enable more students to reach their education goals. Colleges with strong continuous improvement programs will see success in higher college student retention. The result will be more satisfied students and successful alumni.

References

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