



## **From the Editor: Keeping Students in School**

by Amanda Hankel, editor

In this issue of *Higher Education Brief*, we look at the issue of student retention. How do student retention efforts relate to quality efforts at an institution?

Research has long supported the value of a college degree in the United States. Studies have shown that for most individuals, having a college education not only has economic and employment benefits, but also correlates to better health and increased civic engagement.<sup>1</sup>

For many college students today, we also know that having the time and money to complete a college degree is becoming more difficult. And, with unemployment woes hitting recent college graduates hard—holding a bachelor's or even higher-level degree doesn't necessarily guarantee a job in today's economy and makes some question, "Is it worth it?"

In this issue, we bring you articles that discuss why it should be part of an institution's strategic plan to improve retention rates, and how quality tools and techniques can be the launching point for these efforts.

In the article, "Strategies for Doctoral Student Retention: Taking the Roads Less Traveled," Associate Editor Marianne Di Pierro discusses the necessity for institutions to focus on retention among graduate doctoral students, as the nation faces a 50% attrition rate among those students. In the article, Di Pierro offers specific strategies institutions can implement to reverse this trend and improve retention.

Also in the issue, in the article, "In Student Retention, Attitude Seems to Matter Most," read how attitude is a key driver in determining whether first-year students stay enrolled in college and complete their degrees. In a study conducted by two graduate students at the University of Maryland at College Park, students' enrollment patterns at their institution were strongly predicted by how they answered one survey question in the eighth week of their first semester: "Do you like it here?"

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Other articles in the newsletter offer specific ideas and solutions institutions can implement to improve retention. The article, “Taking Student Retention Seriously,” argues that while most colleges and universities have student retention programs, most institutions don’t actually take student retention seriously.

“They have done little to change the essential character of college, little to alter the prevailing character of student educational experience, and therefore little to address the deeper roots of student attrition,” the author writes. “As a result, most efforts to enhance student retention, though successful to some degree, have had more limited impact than they should or could.”

The author offers ways in which institutions can “take retention seriously” and decrease attrition rates.

Another article, “Factors Influencing Student Retention in Higher Education,” looks at the cultural implications of student retention and attrition, and discusses how institutions can embrace minority students and culturally integrate all students.

Finally, in the article, “The Effects of Student Coaching in College,” the authors discuss one strategy that has been found effective in retaining students: individualized student coaching. The authors present evidence from an experiment in which college students were randomly assigned a coach through a coaching service. The coach contacted students regularly to develop their goals, guide them in connecting their daily activities to their long-term goals and support them in building skills.

The study found students who were randomly assigned to a coach were more likely to persist during the treatment period, and were more likely to attend the university one year after the coaching had ended. The authors also contend coaching is a more cost-effective method of achieving retention and completion gains when compared to previously studied interventions, such as increased financial aid.



In higher education, the idea of quality is often thought of in terms of the classroom experience: the academics the institution provides or in developing course curricula. But quality can extend to any facet of a college campus, including retention efforts to keep students in school. Because the fact is this: even if an institution can provide the highest-quality education and the most impressive courses taught by world class faculty, these have little impact if students can't stay enrolled and complete their degree.

*Do you have ideas to improve student retention? Share them with use by emailing [ahankel@asq.org](mailto:ahankel@asq.org).*

## **Reference**

1. Umi Jensen, "Factors Influencing Student Retention in Higher Education," Kamehameha Schools Research and Evaluation Division, February 2011.