Helping Students Finish What They Start

A recent Harvard Graduate School of Education study revealed that just 56% of U.S. college students complete four-year degrees within six years and only 29% of students who start two-year degrees complete coursework within three years. Currently, 33% of U.S. adults hold a bachelor's degree or higher.[1]

Student retention is a complex problem and no silver bullet seems to exist for it—reasons for dropping out may include financial challenges, socioeconomic factors, readiness for college-level coursework or a lack of institutional or social support.

Instead of letting students fall through the cracks, some higher education institutions are endeavoring to learn more about its students and what it can do to help them graduate.

At a public university in the southeastern United States, higher education research expert Jennifer Brown, who earned a doctorate in educational psychology with an emphasis in educational research, decided to investigate why students weren't making it to graduation. She constructed a freshman orientation survey so that the college could spot individuals who are at risk of dropping out or transferring and offer them support.

Recently, Brown answered some questions about the value of using surveys as a tool in higher education research to improve student outcomes.

Education Brief: ***Do you think institutions have fully realized the value of surveys and data? Why is this tried-and-true tool important?***

Brown: No—I do not think institutions realize or use survey data to the maximum extent possible. One of the main reasons is low response rates. On average, you can expect 15 to 25% response rates. Often, the rates are much lower depending on the sample. Most people feel that such low rates do not warrant the effort of survey development and administration. I feel that survey data is important because it can capture attitudes and behaviors of the students. These characteristics cannot be captured from typical institutional data, such as high school grade point averages, standardized test scores and demographics.

Education Brief: ***Why is data-driven decision making so important in higher education?***

Brown: Unfortunately, higher education has been slower to embrace the recent movement of data-driven decisions than K-12 education, which has been fueled by the No Child Left Behind Act. Typically, in higher education, faculty members gather in a room, discuss the issues and brainstorm possible solutions. After several meetings, a list of possible solutions is compiled for a faculty vote.

In recent years, accreditation agencies have included the expectation for institutions to present data that supports their decisions. These expectations have fueled the need for data-driven decisions at the higher education level. From my background in program evaluation, I see the need to evaluate programs using data, including pre-existing and survey data, to determine the effectiveness of such program. One does not want to reinvent the wheel when only a spoke needs replacement. Data can help you determine the issue instead of throwing out the current program and starting over.

Education Brief: *A lot of higher education institutions grapple with improving survey response rates.*

Do you have any insight, advice or best practices to share that can positively affect response rates?

Brown: From my research, I have found three things tend to improve survey response rates:

1. An incentive for participant response that is desired can improve the response rate. I once conducted a freshman student survey and offered a $200 gift card to the university bookstore. The participation rate was less than 10%. In the next survey, I offered $100 in cash—the response rate jumped to more than 20%. The students felt $100 in cash was more valuable than a $200 gift card to the university bookstore.

2. Using web-based survey platforms, such as Survey Monkey and Qualtrics, can improve response rates. I send my invitations to participate via email with an anonymous survey link. It requires the potential respondents to decide whether or not to complete the survey and a few moments of their time to complete the survey. If the potential participants have to complete the survey and return it via U.S. mail, they are less likely to respond. They feel it is simply too much work.

3. Sending multiple reminders at a time when your participant pool does not have a full schedule is another way to improve response rates. Because the majority of my survey research involves college students, I do not send survey invitations during midterms or finals. I aim for the month prior or after midterms. I also send three invitations to participate. Each notice arrives one week after the previous notice.

Education Brief: *What are some unique or creative approaches your organization has used in facilitating surveys and making use of the data?*

Brown: At my college, I conduct a freshman orientation survey with each incoming freshman who has declared a major within the college. This survey collects pre-college characteristics, attitudes and behaviors. Then, I merge this survey data with institutional research, including first-year grade point

average. My primary research interest is undergraduate retention. I have found that the first-year experience lays the foundation for future success. I follow up with freshmen in the spring to collect data about classroom experiences. This summer, I will begin my third cycle of data collection. I hope to use these data sources to predict successful program completion and graduation.

Education Brief: *While there are likely pros and cons to each approach, do you have any thoughts regarding managing the survey function in-house or using a vendor?*

Brown: Smaller institutions tend to use a vendor. Often, they do not have the staff resources necessary to support such large data collection operations. I prefer the in-house approach because it allows the individual institution to cater the survey to the unique needs of the institution and the targeted population. It also allows a faculty or staff member to engage in meaningful research, which benefits the institution.

Education Brief: *Do you have any advice or words of wisdom for professors or administrators who want to strengthen their expertise in survey deployment and analysis?*

Brown: First, look among your staff and see if there are individuals with program evaluation and survey development backgrounds. Second, consider partnering with one of your sister institutions or an institution near your area. From my experience, people are more than willing to assist you if you ask for help.

Reference

1. Lou Carlozo, "Harvard Graduate School of Education," Reuters, March 27, 2012, www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/27/us-attn-andrea-education-dropouts-idUSBRE82Q0Y120120327/.