

Saving Sinking Student Retention Rates

By [Nicole Adrian](#)

There is no doubt that college and university student retention and financial aid issues have been affected by the recent economic crisis in the United States. With the country now in a recession, people are looking at cutting down on spending.

Unfortunately, it appears that some students are also cutting back on higher education.

Private colleges report their students are finding it significantly harder to secure the private loans they need to pay tuition bills, according to a recent survey from the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. The survey went on to say that nearly half of colleges report some students have been forced to take time off or go part-time as a result.

Luckily, educators, administrators and policy makers recognize the importance of raising higher-education retention rates and overhauling student aid—this was true even before the financial crisis. In this issue of *ASQ Higher Education Brief*, Cindy Veenstra writes about the importance of student retention. She notes that students who complete their undergraduate degrees in their chosen majors will enjoy better careers than students who don't complete their degrees. Veenstra has found that academic preparation, academic and social confidence in high school, and established educational and career goals aid college success.

In another article, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California-Los Angeles found that the best way to evaluate an institution's actual degree completion rate is to compute an expected degree completion rate based on the characteristics of the students when they first enroll. Using the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's Freshman Survey data for its work, HERI determined that fewer college students are completing college in four years than was the case a decade ago—but more students are completing their degrees in six years.

Universities are working on programs to help change the fact that students are taking longer to complete college—and spending more money to do so. In one example, Veenstra mentions that Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN, is investing in freshman learning communities to integrate freshman into the college's culture and to improve learning and retention. If more universities institute programs such as this, and more groups work to change financial aid, this country will improve student retention rates.

Now introducing ...

Cindy Veenstra, who writes about student retention in this issues, is *ASQ Higher Education Brief's* new advising editor. Veenstra also wrote the article "Improving the Educational Experience of STEM Majors" for the May issue. She will be charged with selecting issue themes and authors for upcoming issues.

Veenstra is the principal consultant for Veenstra and Associates (www.veenstraconsulting.com) in Saline, MI, which specializes in helping colleges improve student success and graduation rates. Veenstra received her doctorate from the University of Michigan and has research experience in areas including engineering education theory and statistical multivariate approaches. She is a fellow of ASQ and the chair of ASQ's Education Division: Higher Education.

Veenstra can be contacted at cpveenst@umich.edu.