

PREVENTING
STUDENT
DROPOUT
TOOLKIT



INTRODUCTION

With only 45% of students graduating from college, the United States' graduation rate lags behind those of most developed countries. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), U.S. college graduation rates rank 19th out of the 28 countries studied. The average dropout owes upwards of \$7,000 with no diploma to show for their education. The college dropout epidemic is causing students to become burdened by significant debt, lose precious time, and earn less in their careers than their counterparts with degrees, making this a critical issue for schools to address.

Institutions can take the initiative in helping address common areas that lead students to drop out by addressing how to best support students in the classroom, provide adequate financial assistance, and emotionally engage students.

PREVENTING STUDENT DROPOUT TOOLKIT

This toolkit provides solutions to address three areas of student support:

1.

ACADEMIC



Identify areas where your institution can improve course delivery and scheduling options, ensure students are prepared for college, and provide additional learning opportunities outside of the classroom.

2.

FINANCIAL



Understand how to allocate financial assistance into emergency aid grants, improve financial aid offices, and alleviate location and transportation costs.

3.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT



Learn where you can increase access to student counseling and support services.

1. ACADEMIC SOLUTIONS



ACADEMIC PREPARATION

Students who are not prepared for the demands of college coursework are much more likely to drop out; nearly half of U.S. high school graduates complete neither a college- nor career-ready course of study. Institutions must take appropriate steps to evaluate and assist with college readiness.



SOLUTIONS

- **Admissions and placement testing** helps institutions determine at an early stage which students should be admitted and at what course level they should be placed.
- **Remedial coursework for high potential students with low academic experience** needed to succeed in college.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

- Remedial courses generally have high failure and attrition rates.
- Students entering college with lower levels of high school mathematics are less likely to graduate.

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

-  Identify at-risk students using data-driven strategies. This can be as simple as tracking pass/fail rates in remedial courses or conducting statistical modeling to predict the likelihood of an incoming student persisting to degree completion.
-  Require students taking remedial courses to enroll in short modules, refresher courses, or supplemental instruction to accompany their classes.

1. ACADEMIC SOLUTIONS



ACADEMIC PROGRESS

Failure to make satisfactory academic progress is one of the strongest predictors of student attrition. Common barriers to progress cited by non-graduating students include inconvenient course scheduling and a lack of resources promoting academic success. However, flexible scheduling and learning opportunities outside the classroom can motivate students to stay enrolled; a mix of part-time and full-time enrollment was found to boost graduation rates of non-first-time community college students by 16%.



SOLUTIONS

- **Online, evening, or weekend courses** provide flexibility for students, especially working professionals and students with family commitments. Evening and weekend courses offer alternative scheduling options for students who seek face-to-face interaction with faculty and classmates.
- **Training and internship programs** can entice students to stay and complete their degree in exchange for professional development opportunities.
- **Tutoring services** are especially valuable for students who are struggling academically.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

- Students enrolled in some academic programs may be more at risk of dropping out than students enrolled in other programs.
- There should be sufficient demand for alternative delivery methods to launch.

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

-  Identify courses and programs with high withdrawal and/or failure rates.
-  Survey students to identify preferences of working professionals and students with family commitments who may benefit from flexible courses and additional support, and to determine interest levels in internship and training opportunities.

2. FINANCIAL SOLUTIONS



DIRECT SUPPORT

Financial strain is one of the most prominent reasons students are unable to complete their degree programs. Despite budget cuts and shrinking financial resources, institutions can still direct support to students at risk of dropping out due to financial reasons.

SOLUTIONS

- **Small grants**, ranging from \$500 to \$1,000, can often make enough of a difference to prevent student attrition. A study completed at Stanford University found that a \$1,000 increase in financial aid for in-need students on average leads to a 2% to 4% increase in student retention.
- **Unconventional financial support such as textbook or software grants:** A 2017 report found that nearly half of students with a zero expected family contribution who received more than \$7,500 in financial aid graduated or transferred, compared to 17% of those who received between \$1,001 and \$2,500 in aid.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

- While small increases in financial aid for at-risk students leads to increases in student retention, such an increase may not be large enough to justify increasing aid to all students. Institutions must ensure that financial aid is targeted to the right individuals.
- Studies have found that tying financial aid to academic progress is more effective at preventing student dropout than purely need-based aid.

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

- ✂ Target financial aid to students with the largest unmet needs, and increase the percentage of met need up to 55% to 60%—beyond which the impact of increased financial aid can diminish.
- ✂ Offer academic performance-based grants to in-need students, especially those who are one or two semesters away from graduating.

2. FINANCIAL SOLUTIONS



OPERATIONAL SUPPORT

Student dropout is not only influenced by financial issues themselves, but also the administration of financial aid offices which are designed to help students. A large number of students who would qualify for federal financial aid fail to even apply; a quarter of high school students who may have qualified for the FAFSA do not complete it, with estimates of over \$1 billion in aid, grants, and scholarships going unclaimed each year. Ensuring that eligible students understand and apply for financial aid can serve as a low-cost strategy to prevent student dropout.



SOLUTIONS

- **Proactive financial aid assistance** includes educating students about financial aid options and helping students who are struggling to fill out the FAFSA forms.
- **Increased financial aid office sizing and budget** can help student financial aid offices reach out to and assist greater numbers of students to prevent student dropout.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

- Financial aid offices may be limited in their ability to grow their staff numbers and assistance capabilities by their allocated budgets.

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

-  Send out automatic reminders to students about FAFSA deadlines.
-  Invest in and install financial software that can stand-in for staff personnel and can assist students with filling out federal aid and tax forms.

3. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT SOLUTIONS



DIRECT ENGAGEMENT

Students often cite a lack of institutional support when dealing with personal issues as a contributor to their decision to drop out. Certain demographic groups are often in greater need of counseling and support services, such as first-generation students. First-generation students are 14% less likely to graduate compared to students whose parents have higher education experience, and are twice as likely to depart from the institution before the start of the second year.

SOLUTIONS

- **Increased advising and services to at-risk students** such as first-generation students, underrepresented populations, international students, veterans, and transfer students can help integrate these student populations into an institution.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

- Outreach to at-risk students may be difficult if students are unaware of such services or unable to visit campus often.
- First-generation students are often at a disadvantage as their parents are unfamiliar with navigating the college environment and understanding academic expectations.

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS



Intrusive advising targets individual students at heightened risk of dropping out. Students who otherwise might never speak to an advisor gain exposure to an array of valuable resources, and institutions communicate interest and care to students who may feel marginalized or isolated.



Other services such as child care services are more indirect, but still effective ways to positively engage with students, especially those with family commitments.

3. STUDENT ENGAGEMENT SOLUTIONS



SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUPPORT

The establishment of relationships with peers, as well as mentors and faculty members, positively influences student retention – particularly among underrepresented groups. The act of socially integrating into a campus community is a cumulative process, so it is essential for students to connect to the campus culture early in their academic experience. Participating in student organizations or peer-to-peer tutoring can also positively influence retention. For example, The University of Texas at El Paso's peer-led team learning STEM workshops saw a 15% increase in the weighted average of the passing rate compared to previous years.

SOLUTIONS

- **Living-learning communities** incorporate residential components into traditional learning communities. The most common approach is to segment living-learning communities by specific academic fields.
- **Targeted first-year programs** help prevent student dropout during their first year, which is when student dropout rates are at their highest. Examples of such programs include but are not limited to: pre-term orientation, summer bridge programs, and targeted seminars.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

Best practices for such initiatives require:

- A positive working relationship between academic affairs and student affairs
- Involvement of faculty in residence halls
- Appropriate funding
- Assessment strategies
- University wide buy-in and commitment from institutional leadership

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

- Combine targeted first-year programs; student service programs are often integrated into summer bridge programs and seminars.
- Emphasize long-term gains to institutional leadership in order to acquire buy-in.

TOOLKIT RECAP:

Your Student Retention Toolkit



ACADEMIC SOLUTIONS

How can we prepare students for college and make scheduling convenient?



ACADEMIC PREPARATION

- Admission and placement testing
- Remedial coursework for high potential students with low academic experience



ACADEMIC PROGRESS

- Online, evening, and/or weekend courses
- Training and internship programs
- Tutoring services



FINANCIAL SOLUTIONS

How can we make school more affordable for students?



DIRECT SUPPORT

- Small grants
- Unconventional financial support such as textbook or software grants



OPERATIONAL SUPPORT

- Proactive financial aid assistance
- Increased financial aid office sizing and budget



STUDENT ENGAGEMENT SOLUTIONS

How can we support students' mental health?



DIRECT ENGAGEMENT

- Increased advising and services to at-risk students



SOCIAL & ENVIRONMENTAL SUPPORT

- Living-learning communities
- Targeted first-year programs

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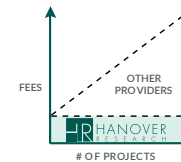
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ACADEMIC SOLUTIONS

- **Enrollment Management**
Target the optimal pool of students and maximize application and acceptance rates.
- **Academic Development:**
Strengthen your academic portfolio through market analysis of existing and potential new programs.
- **Student Experience:**
Spot at-risk students early, identify the drivers of attrition, and pinpoint factors driving poor post-graduate outcomes.

ADMINISTRATIVE SOLUTIONS

- **Finance**
Increase revenue and dynamically evaluate costs to run an efficient, financially viable, and growth-oriented institution.
- **Advancement:**
Highlight your institutional impact with donors and alumni.
- **Marketing:**
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