# Investing in Staff for Student Retention

## By Patricia L. Farrell

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The American college student population will continue to diversify during the first decades of the 21st century. By 2020, 46 percent of the nation's total enrollments will be students of color. Demographers also expect increases in other categories, including low-income, first-generation, older adult, and non-native students.[1]

Will these students persist through college? Right now, one in every four students drops out before the sophomore year.[2] African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans—groups correlated with low-income—show lower completion rates than whites and Asians among students at four-year institutions.[3] About 34 percent of all traditional age freshmen entering four-year colleges do not graduate within six years. An estimated additional eight to 12 percent enter and graduate from different four-year colleges within that period.[4]

Student retention is a well-studied aspect of postsecondary education. Most research concentrates on faculty, students, and student affairs professionals. Many education support professionals (ESPs)—technical, clerical, skilled crafts, service, and maintenance workers—also work closely with students. But research on how this large component of the academic workforce affects student retention is sparse.[5]

This essay defines "staff" as non-faculty employees who work with students, including ESPs and academic professionals. It explains why postsecondary institutions must invest in staff development to enhance student retention. After tracing the origins of my commitment to this field, I place the findings of a retention study of first-time freshmen in the context of research on student persistence. Then I provide recommendations for improving staff development.

## PASSION FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT

I always knew that I wanted to be an educator. But I was pushed as a young woman to break away from education, so I pursued a bachelor's degree in economics and political science. I worked in staff-related positions in the for-profit sector before returning to my alma mater to get a master's degree in organizational development and adult learning. My focus on the psychological and sociological aspects of these fields, combined with on-campus employment, enabled me to appreciate frontline staff members at financial aid and registrar's offices. But I also remembered my frustration as a student for being treated as a number, interacting with people who did not enjoy their jobs, or who were so overwhelmed by their jobs that they did not take the time to work with the student on the problem.

After receiving my master's degree, I worked as an organizational development and training specialist at Intel Corporation. The company required an eight-day orientation for new hires—four days learning Intel corporate culture, benefits, and history, and four days at our assigned factory worksites learning about *its* culture. Intel also required employees to attend a local new-hire orientation whenever they switched factories. All orientations included tips for strengthening interpersonal skills, such as conducting effective meetings and assuring constructive confrontations. Intel required employees to discuss progress, issues, and personal aspirations within the corporation with their managers once a month. I felt thoroughly familiar with Intel's culture and processes when I began my new position.

After five years of learning about, facilitating, and implementing programs based on organizational development theory, I left the high tech corporate world to pursue a Ph.D. in higher, adult, and lifelong education. I worked full-time as an academic adviser while a student. In contrast to Intel, the university offered little preparation to employees who interacted with a diverse group of students, implemented institutional policies and procedures, and worked with other administrators and faculty. I attended a half-day workshop to complete my benefit forms and to obtain a data dump about the institution, including student demographics. New-hire upper level administrators and faculty members attended a one-day orientation workshop that focused as much on networking as on learning about the institution—its students, culture, and processes. I asked why the university did not value ESPs and other staff members who interacted with students in the registrar's and financial aid offices, the academic departments, the health facility, and the libraries.

I bore these questions in mind while a colleague and I studied engagement and retention of freshmen who worked and took out loans while living on campus. Staff members, the study found, significantly influenced student decisions to stay or leave. Colleges, in turn, can teach ways of improving student-staff interactions.

## STUDENT RETENTION RESEARCH

Before the 1970s, colleges attributed student departure to personal failure. Students were not motivated, or did not have the skills or qualities needed to complete college. The colleges assumed no blame for student departure.[6] Research on student retention conducted in the 1970s helped change this attribution; the academic and social systems of a college affected retention.[7] We now possess sociological, psychological, physical, and economic models that help us understand the student and institutional perspective on departure.[8]

### The Student Perspective

Older studies of student retention analyzed traditional undergraduates: 18-to-22 year old, white, full-time students attending residential colleges. Studies conducted since the 1980s incorporated the changing demographics of undergraduate students, including different types of postsecondary institutions.[9] Some

studies found correlations between the lower rates of minority student persistence and the absence of a salutary climate, of adequate financial aid, and of other students of color.[10] Retention increased, other studies found, when students remained connected to their community, family, church, or tribe.[11] Faculty, administrators, and staff may incorrectly presume that all students have similar identities and ways of getting involved and staying in school. Retention at community colleges increased (especially among students of color), one study found, when someone challenged that presumption by integrating students into campus life.[12]

## The Organizational Perspective

Postsecondary institutions are complex social systems defined by the relationships among the people, bureaucratic processes, structural arrangements, mission and values, traditions and history. A study of the effect of administrative styles on retention found a positive correlation between a collegial, humanistic administrative style and student retention. Conversely, the study found a negative correlation between a hierarchical or bureaucratic administrative style and retention.[13] A college needs financially secure students, but it should not admit students for the "benefit of the institution and not for the good of the student."[14] A concern for its reputation among potential students, donors, and employees should motivate a college to retain students for economic, ethical, and institutional reasons.[15]

## The Role of Faculty

Research on first-year programs and outside-the-classroom experiences points to the prominence of faculty for student retention. Researchers linked retention to involvement in the classroom—the only place where many students meet other students and the faculty.[16] Many researchers recommended faculty development programs focused on teaching and learning. These programs are now campus fixtures. "Though it is true, as we are often reminded, that student retention is everyone's business, it is now evident that is the business of the faculty in particular," one scholar noted. "Their involvement in institutional retention efforts is often critical to the success of those efforts. Regrettably, faculty involvement is still more limited than it should be."[17] Two scholars recently offered recommendations for research on the role of faculty in student retention, including the effect of faculty development programs, of hiring part-time faculty members, and of retention program implementation.

Two other scholars have distilled key retention variables into three categories.[18] *Student variables* are "inputs," including prior academic achievement, socioeconomic status, gender, age, race/ethnicity, and student commitment to completing a degree program. *Institutional variables,* also inputs, include selectivity, size, institutional type and control, and gender and racial composition. *Environmental variables* include campus-based inputs and outcomes, such as first-year GPA, academic major field, enrollment status, quality of student effort, interactions with faculty and other students, participation in extracurricular activities, need to work, satisfaction with college life, alcohol abuse, and participation in Greek life or intercollegiate athletics. Other environmental variables include the campus climate, availability of financial aid, intentional institutional interventions, the classroom experience, and the availability of first-year seminars, orientation programs, living environments, learning communities, academic advising, and service learning.

Staff members affect many of these environmental variables, including registration, financial aid, and libraries, as well as student activities, orientation programs, living environments, and learning communities. Student retention is therefore everyone's business. But, if so, why do we lack research on the effect of staff member interactions with students on retention? More important, why do many colleges fail to invest in staff development?

## A STUDY OF STUDENT RETENTION AND ENGAGEMENT

We possess descriptive and inferential statistical studies of the impact of financial aid and college tuition on student engagement and retention. But we lack research on the relationship between staff-related *environmental variables* on these outcomes. To remedy this gap, a colleague and I studied persistence patterns among 70 first-time freshmen at four public doctoral universities during the 2006–07 academic year. The participants were primarily first generation dormitory residents who needed employment and who took out loans for college. Using blogs, online surveys, and focus groups, we studied how students with unmet financial need attempted to remain academically and socially engaged.

Our survey noted a relatively high surface level of student satisfaction with the freshman experience at the end of the semester (very satisfied = 24 percent; 54 percent = satisfied). But these students encountered numerous difficulties navigating the university's infrastructure beginning with a complex, confusing hiring system. About 74 percent of their parents expected these freshmen to help with their unmet financial aid by working. We learned that 20 percent worked up to 40 hours at one or more jobs to meet these expectations. These students paid an academic price: approximately 61 percent reported that work obligations limited their campus involvement, despite dorm residence. Work obligations forced almost 90 percent of the sampled students to miss optional evening study sessions. "I could have done better in my chemistry class," one student reported, "if I had attended some of the study sessions." Conversely, employers disapproved when students selected school over work. "I had to take a shift off from work [on campus]," one student noted, "because I had to take a test for my major. I got penalized [by my work] which I don't think should happen considering it was for school."

The students acknowledged institutional help in gaining access, but, they added, the university forgot about them when it came to financial aid. The university, for example, assigned *academic* advisors who worked one-on-one with freshmen during summer orientation and who were available throughout the year. By contrast, freshmen had no one-on-one time with *financial aid* advisors during orientation, and they were not assigned financial aid advisers for the academic year. Many students, not knowing the right questions to ask about the complex financial aid system, spent many hours in line or on the phone. When asked how they felt about the services provided by the financial aid office, the modal response was "neutral" (32 percent) on a five-point scale ranging from "very satisfied" to "very unsatisfied." Students also expressed concern about health care services. More than half of the students worried about their health (54 percent "occasionally" and "sometimes") and about health care expenses; many respondents mentioned ailments plaguing them for more than half a semester.

Students, we learned, relied heavily on their social networks to learn how to navigate many systems on campus. They also turned for help to their dormitory counselors because of their proximity, age, helpfulness, and friendliness. But they sometimes learned too late that they had obtained incorrect information about on-campus employment, financial aid, and health care. Nor did the students understand how their colleges made decisions related to the cost of tuition and fees.

These findings illustrate the importance of informed, professionally developed staff for student retention. Colleges must also maintain policies of openness and transparency in institutional planning, and must provide opportunities for student participation in policy discussions and in decision-making.[19]

## IMPLICATIONS FOR STAFF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Here are recommendations for staff professional development derived from key principles

of organizational development: culture, climate, mission/vision, personal mastery, mental models, and team learning.

Faculty development and professional and organizational development offices have become fixtures on many campuses. These offices primarily focus on improving faculty teaching and student learning, a critical component for student retention. But staff members are singularly influential in students' decisions to stay in college. Modifying the ways in which student-staff interactions occur can affect these decisions. Professional development for staff members should focus on mastering job-related skills and knowledge, and on strengthening interpersonal skills.[20] Programs should tap the potential of staff members by developing their creativity; a reactive outlook rarely benefits staff or students.[21] This type of professional development is well worth the considerable time and energy required for success.

One scholar has developed three principles for effective student retention. First, all community members must commit to serving students. Second, the college must commit to educate all students. Last, retention programs must work to integrate all students into the social and academic life of the college.[22] All individuals—students, faculty, staff, and administration—have roles to play in implementing these principles. But two other scholars added a fourth principle. Institutional characteristics—mission, culture, structure, and organization—can also affect student retention.[23] This principle is closely related to the others.[24] A college starts to obtain commitment to student retention by focusing on its mission, culture, and structure…all aspects of "one of the most powerful and stable forces operating."[25] College culture—shared beliefs, values, and assumptions—is "reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it."[26] Ultimately, it is reflected in the attitudes and behaviors of its employees.[27]

College officials should analyze the different elements of the campus culture: artifacts, patterns, behavioral norms, values, and assumptions before conducting employee training (Table 1).[28] These officials should then examine unit subcultures that may also affect student retention.

## Table 1.  Elements of Organizational Culture

| Element of Organizational Culture | Definition |
| --- | --- |
| Artifact | The "physical manifestations and products of cultural activity" conveying values and assumptions.[29] |
| Patterns of Behavior | Observable activities—including decision-making, communications, and employee socialization—reflecting underlying beliefs, values, and assumptions.[30] |
| Behavioral Norms | Employee beliefs guiding actions emerging from previous experience and culture reinforcement.[31] |
| Values | Core values are principles, tenets, and standards that provide a basis for action and a foundation for decision-making. They become mental habits influencing how people act toward each other, clients, the public, and external stakeholders. Core values rarely change; activities and services often change to align with core values. |
| Assumptions | Values confirmed through experience until they are taken for granted.[32] It is difficult to identify assumptions because individuals holding them are not always aware of their existence.[33] |

Understanding campus cultures and sub-cultures is a pre-requisite for designing successful professional development programs. "Ill-conceived or poorly executed programs reflect more than incompetence or unwillingness," notes one scholar. "Training failure can be a manifestation of the values, beliefs, and assumptions shared by members of various levels of organizational culture."[34] Staff training will fail, and students will leave, in a dysfunctional environment. Effective training should begin with in-depth new hire orientation at the institutional and unit levels. It should extend to employees who transfer to a new unit or department within the institution. Unions, having experience in staff development, should collaborate in creating and maintaining these professional development programs. They may educate staff to become "case workers" who assist students through difficult issues—everything from financial aid through immigration—that can affect student interactions and retention.[35]

Such programs are not half-day workshops that rely on PowerPoint slides to convey the culture, mission, and artifacts of the college. A successful orientation, the Intel example suggests, should include interactive workshops that transform new hires into institutional citizens. Representatives of all constituencies, including students, should participate in discussions of organizational culture, climate, structure, and processes.

Having conveyed a concrete understanding of the campus culture, the orientation may turn to student, institutional, and environmental variables affecting retention.[36] This education should challenge the presumptions of participants—their beliefs derived from prior experiences that explain cause and effect to us, lead us to expect certain results, give meaning to events, and influence us to behave in certain ways.[37] Challenging presumptions—especially those related to student behavior—may lead to more productive student-staff interactions. During orientation, staff members should learn about resources within academic and student affairs that can connect and support students in their college experience.[38]

Meetings of department or college employees, including faculty and students, should reinforce the new hire orientations. These meetings might discuss student demographics, and potential changes to mission, vision, principles, budget, and employment. They should facilitate team learning and challenge mental models; they should not be primarily informational. Team learning and involvement in decision making develop the capacity of a department or college to meet its mission by developing a shared vision of education. A shared vision may in turn increase student retention since the resultant staff contributions to building a healthy campus culture affect student readiness to learn.

Many researchers call for faculty development programs and for student retention programs, especially for first-year students. Fewer scholars perceive the considerable influence of staff members on retention. To reiterate: student retention and faculty development programs have roles to play, *if* they address campus culture, climate, assumptions, and norms. But these programs can only affect part of a student's academic and social experiences. Staff professional development programs should complement these initiatives since the daily interactions students and staff members may substantially influence student enthusiasm—and student retention.

## NOTES

[1] Seurkamp, 2007.

[2] ACT, 2000.

[3] Lee, 2004.

[4] Adelman, 2006.

[5] The proportions of ESPs and faculty are nearly identical: 27.2 percent ESPs and 27.8 percent faculty (NCES, 2007).

[6] Tinto, 2006–07.

[7] Spady, 1970; Tinto; 1975.

[8] Braxton and Hirschy, 2005; Ishler and Upcraft, 2005; Reason, 2003; Tinto, 2005.

[9] Reason, 2003.

[10] Allen, 1992; Hurtado, 1994; Nora, 1987; Rendon, 1994; Solorzano, Ceja, and Yooso, 2000.

[11] Nora, 2001; Rendon, 1996; Tierney, 1992.

[12] Rendon, 1994.

[13] Astin and Scherreri, 1980.

[14] Bean, 1986, 47.

[15] Bean, 1986.

[16] Tinto, 2006–07.

[17] Ibid., 5.

[18] Ishler and Upcraft, 2005.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Cascio, 1988.

[21] Senge, 1990.

[22] Tinto, 1993.

[23] Braxton and Mundy, 2001, 95.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Schein, 1996, 231.

[26] Tierney, 1988, 3.

[27] Kopelman, Brief, and Guzzo, 1990.

[28] Schein, 1990; Rousseau, 1990.

[29] Rousseau, 1990, 157.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.; Church and Waclawski, 2001.

[32] Schein, 1984.

[33] Rousseau, 1990.

[34] Bunch, 2007, 157.

[35] Lee, 2006.

[36] Isher and Upcraft, 2005.

[37] Senge, 1990.

[38] Braxton and Mundy, 2001-02.

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