



Strategies for Retaining Students in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Student retention has long been a challenge for college institutions. This research aims to provide college leaders with strategies to enhance student retention by gaining consensus from a panel of experts on effective retention strategies. The research question posed is part of a larger study: “What is the consensus among participants regarding strategies to retain students in college?” The results identified key strategies: (1) focusing on student engagement; (2) fostering an environment of student support; (3) cultivating a campus culture of community; (4) building relationships among students, staff, and faculty; and (5) providing resources to support retention efforts. These findings offer valuable insights for practitioners and college leaders aiming to improve student retention within their institutions, whether throughout the academic year or during summer sessions.

Keywords: retention; engagement; support; community; relationships

Submitted: 10 August 2025

Accepted: 17 January 2026

Published: 14 April 2026

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INTRODUCTION

For years, leaders in higher education have actively pursued strategies to enhance student retention and sustain enrollment across their institutions. Recognizing the critical role that both educational and financial barriers play, they have emphasized the importance of addressing these foundational challenges to bolster retention efforts (Levesque, 2018). By implementing targeted, evidence-based initiatives on campus, administrators can cultivate environments that support students' academic pursuits and long-term success. A focus on purposeful retention practices paired with opportunities for skill development positions colleges to foster upward economic mobility among their students (Mooney & Francis, 2018). Through responsive and practical interventions that address the core challenges students face, institutions may not only reduce dropout rates and transfer attrition but also meaningfully improve retention outcomes.

BACKGROUND

Student retention is one of the most critical measures of success in higher education (Soika, 2022). As such, efforts to improve retention have long been the focus of scholarly inquiry and administrative strategy. Although colleges continue to invest in initiatives aimed at increasing graduation rates, persistent challenges in retaining students underscore a deeper concern. Deficiencies in retention frameworks may contribute to premature withdrawal or discontinuation of enrollment, signaling a need for more adaptive and comprehensive interventions. To address these gaps, institutional leaders should reexamine prevailing retention models and consider implementing multifaceted support systems that respond to students' evolving academic and personal needs.

THE PROBLEM

The problem is that a portion of college students fail to complete their enrollment, resulting in poor retention outcomes. Addressing this issue requires institutions to adopt sustained, pragmatic strategies and furnish students with resources that extend beyond initial matriculation and support their progression through graduation. Robust retention initiatives not only assist students in realizing their academic ambitions but also enable institutions to fulfill their broader educational missions and optimize programmatic success (Hash, 2021).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative Delphi study aimed to achieve consensus among a panel of education leaders regarding effective strategies for improving student retention. Through iterative feedback, the panel offered nuanced insights into the factors influencing persistence and proposed actionable approaches to enhance retention within college settings. From the outset, institutions possess the capacity to influence students' economic mobility by investing in sustained retention initiatives and skill-building opportunities (Mooney & Francis, 2018). Accordingly, it is imperative for college leaders to remain open to collaborative learning—drawing from the expertise of their peers—to refine and expand efforts that address persistent challenges in student retention.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Educational leaders are responsible for implementing strategies that enhance college retention. Collins and Eaton (2021) emphasized that the increasing cost of college for students and their families creates a responsibility to continue seeking strategies to address retention concerns. In contrast, Caballero (2020) argued that the main factor that affects retention

is money and not high tuition costs. Many students attempt to balance employment with academic commitments, yet those who ultimately withdraw often cite the difficulty of managing both responsibilities as a key factor (Caballero, 2020). Addressing retention challenges effectively requires college leaders to develop a nuanced understanding of the various factors influencing student persistence. Nonacademic or environmental variables such as finances, work schedules, outside support, responsibilities, lack of childcare, and the ability to transfer could cause a student to drop out or hinder their ability to persist through graduation (Ocean, 2021). Therefore, by helping students navigate and overcome these types of challenges, institutions can strengthen retention efforts and guide learners successfully toward graduation.

HISTORICAL CONTENT

The massification of higher education at over 14 million students magnified the issue of student retention and persistence in higher education (College Student Retention, 2006). As enrollment numbers grew, the shift from access to retention became the primary concern. In addition, the increase in student numbers, diversity, and student levels of preparedness caused a continued focus on challenges of student retention for colleges (Williamson & Goldsmith, 2013). Additionally, as state funding decreased, institutions strongly emphasized student retention as the effects of financial challenges and enrollment management began to emerge in community colleges (Summers, 2003).

PERSISTENCE AND RETENTION

During the late 1970s, two-year colleges had higher dropout rates than four-year colleges (Tinto, 1975). In addition, the retention rates of two-year colleges were lower than expected due to the entering students' moderate motivation and academic ability (Tinto, 1975). During this time, colleges needed to focus on improving retention and intervention strategies to help students succeed (Parker, 1997). As a result, leaders pursued strategies to strengthen persistence in higher education institutions to offset retention challenges.

Persistence and continued enrollment are influenced by a complex interplay of challenges and successes, both of which significantly impact student retention. One challenge is financials, in which financial stress increases the likelihood of one discontinuing college (Britt et al., 2017). Financial constraints and monetary pressures can significantly influence a student's decision to persist at their current institution. For a quarter century, a significant initiative for improving persistence was the federal Pell grant, which provided students with free money for school; however, despite increased funding and federal loans, persistence has not substantially improved, which hinders retention (Stampen & Hansen, 1999). In turn, students continue to drop out of college at an unacceptable rate, which negatively impacts overall retention metrics.

DROPOUT AND RETENTION

Financial barriers remain a significant challenge for many students, often leading to course withdrawal, forcing some to drop out of their college. Breier (2010) suggested that the role of financial considerations in higher-education student dropout is a recognizable challenge. Multiple factors influence students' ability to continue their college education, with financial barriers posing a significant threat to both persistence and retention. In addition to financial concerns, students with disabilities may also face unique challenges that impact their academic journey.

A portion of students enrolled in college struggle with disabilities that affect their learning, causing them to drop out. Students with learning disabilities (LD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) represent the largest segment of college students with documented disabilities, take longer to complete a college education, and drop out at

higher rates than peers without disabilities (Richman et al., 2014). College leaders contend with resources to support this population, with accommodations focused on student success for retention purposes. Legislation and policy changes have increased the enrollment of students with disabilities in higher education, including establishing accommodations for educational institutions to provide accessible facilities and services to minimize barriers to equal participation in education (Schreuer & Sachs, 2014). The availability of accommodations may vary and depend on the student's impairment, while students with disabilities might also have to negotiate with faculty for academic accommodations (Fichten et al., 2014). Students with disabilities frequently encounter academic barriers that require self-advocacy to secure appropriate accommodations. The burden of navigating these challenges independently can be substantial and, in some cases, may contribute to students dropping out of their college.

Various personal factors may also contribute to students discontinuing their enrollment at their current institution while simultaneously complicating administrative efforts to implement effective retention strategies. The reasons students drop out are varied, and many are related to situations beyond the control of the college (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Students give different reasons for leaving, such as a change in work schedule, health problems, difficulty in obtaining childcare, financial burdens, inconvenient class scheduling, change in residence, or attendance at another institution (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Additionally, there are primary barriers that affect student retention. These barriers were identified as (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Parker, 1997):

- jobs;
- family responsibilities;
- location of colleges;
- lack of minority faculty or staff;
- lack of college funds for intervention programs;
- financial inability;
- lack of appropriate social or cultural activities; and
- unsupportive surrounding community.

These barriers significantly impact student persistence and pose ongoing retention challenges for institutions. As student needs become increasingly multifaceted, colleges often struggle to develop comprehensive strategies that effectively address the full scope of these concerns.

CURRENT CONTENT

While students typically enter college with the intention of completing a degree, they may encounter unforeseen challenges that hinder their ability to persist and achieve their academic goals. Mooney and Francis (2018) and Joyce and White (2020) emphasized that peer-to-faculty engagement is a critical factor in promoting student retention. They further assert that faculty members play a pivotal role in this process by serving as advisors, mentors, and role models—providing students with the guidance and resources necessary to support their academic persistence and degree completion.

Mental health represents a significant factor that can impede student persistence in higher education. Kalkbrenner et al. (2021b) suggests that college student mental health is a crucial contributing factor to student retention and personal well-being. Mental distress directly impacts academics, leading to poor academic performance and dropout, causing retention challenges (Antunes & Langmuir, 2021). According to Kalkbrenner et al. (2021b), past research uncovered several factors that contributed to college student retention, including campus engagement, academic preparation, social connections, cost of tuition, faculty support, and financial aid availability.

ADVISING AND STUDENT PERSISTENCE

Challenges stemming from persistence are closely related to personal problems. Retention, in some instances, may not be part of the college's day-to-day culture since advising involves class scheduling and reviewing short- and long-term academic goals to promote a work-life balance (McGhee, 2020). However, college advising is vital for students' persistence.

Education leaders may spend time in meetings and training focused on advising strategies that connect the needs of students through the support of academic advisors. According to Zhang et al. (2019), advising students for success has always been an essential and challenging task in higher education; however, focusing on student success, satisfaction, and retention is crucial. It is a fact that the quality of interaction between a student and a concerned individual on campus, often through academic advising, is a crucial contributor to college retention (Uddin, 2020). Academic advising plays a critical role in supporting student success by actively listening to student concerns and providing tailored guidance that facilitates academic progress. As a long-standing component of the educational system, effective advising has been shown to positively influence retention. In its absence, students may lack the necessary support to navigate institutional challenges, increasing the likelihood of attrition.

DROPOUT AND BARRIERS

The Education Data Initiative has suggested that the overall dropout rate for undergraduate college students in the United States is 40% (cited in Hanson, 2021). The source also indicates that the dropout rate comes from first-year college students dropping out before their sophomore year at 30% with black college students dropping out at a rate of 54%, and college dropouts left due to financial challenges at 38% (Hanson, 2021). Financial concerns are an issue for students dropping out of college; however, other factors exist. For example, more students drop out of two-year institutions instead of four-year colleges no matter their age, gender, or ethnicity, and those in the highest income brackets tend to have the lowest dropout rates (Hanson, 2021).

Financial struggles may work against low-income students, prompting barriers to their college enrollment or continuance. Unfortunately, low-income students do not have comparable funding resources as peers from more affluent households, which may cause interruptions in their college education. Institutions should invest in targeted resources aimed at reducing obstacles that alleviate student success. These issues include academic under-preparation, financial difficulties, lack of family or peer support, challenges adapting to campus culture, microaggressions, harassment, on-campus discrimination, and physical or emotional illness aggravated by these stressors (Wexelbaum, 2018). Navigating institutional and personal challenges can be particularly complex for students, especially when undertaken without adequate support. In response, colleges often seek to mitigate these difficulties by providing targeted on-campus resources. However, elevated levels of student stress remain a significant factor contributing to attrition and impeding degree completion.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK LITERATURE

This research identified a retention theory and model specifically designed to support student persistence in higher education. While foundational theories and models of student retention have remained relatively consistent over time and continue to serve as guiding frameworks, the evolving complexity of student needs and institutional challenges has underscored the necessity for more adaptive and innovative approaches to improving retention outcomes.

- **Summerskill's Theory of Student Retention:** In 1962, John Summerskill attributed a cause of retention, or lack thereof, to psychological and motivational factors suggesting that behavior, attitudes, and satisfaction could

influence external and internal factors (Barclay et al., 2018). At times, students' challenges may be more than some institutions can handle and without resolutions they may cause students to drop out or transfer.

- **Undergraduate Dropout Process Model:** The undergraduate dropout process model theory assumes that students operate with academic and social central institutional systems (Burke, 2019). Educational systems that encompass effective social systems and promote communication efforts to reach students with various needs prove to have higher efforts placed on retention.

Examining Summerskill's focus on psychological and motivational factors alongside the undergraduate dropout process model's emphasis on academic and social integration reveals the multifaceted nature of student persistence.

DATA RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

To support this research, three rounds of surveys were administered:

Round 1: Providing Expert Opinions

Participants were asked to provide their expert opinions regarding factors that affect student retention and the following themes were identified:

1. *Engages* students in learning.
2. Arranges social/community *support* to assist with personal issues.
3. Helps students develop a sense of commitment through campus *community*.
4. Cultivates *relationships* among staff, faculty, and students.
5. Provides outside *resources* beyond academics.

EMERGENT THEMES

Five themes were identified through the data based on participant feedback (see as displayed in **Table 1**).

| Theme Category | Responses from Participants (N = 12) | Provided by Participants |
|----------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| Retention | 80% | Engages students in learning (<i>student engagement</i>) |
| Strategies | 100% | Arranges social/community support to assist with personal issues (<i>student support</i>) |
| | 40% | Helps students develop a sense of commitment through campus community (<i>campus community</i>) |
| | 70% | Provides outside resources beyond academics (<i>constructive resources</i>) |

Table 1: Emergent Themes Identified by Expert Participants.

Round 2: Rating Student Retention Factors

Participants considered the top five strategies identified, as shown in **Table 2**.

| Strategies | Response Rate “Strongly Agree” | Response Rate “Agree” |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Student Engagement | 80% | 20% |
| Student Support | 80% | 20% |
| Campus Community | 80% | 20% |
| Building Relationships | 100% | 0% |
| Constructive Resources | 60% | 40% |

Table 2: Round 2 Top 5 Rated Responses—Strategies.

Round 3: Reviewing Student Retention Factors

Participants utilized a rating scale; therefore, based on the data of the results, four topics reached consensus at 80% or higher of “required” for student retention (see **Table 3**):

| Strategies | Provided by Participants | Response Rate |
|------------------------|---|---------------|
| Student Engagement | Engages students in learning. | 90% |
| Student Support | Arranges social/community support to assist with personal issues. | 80% |
| Building Relationships | Cultivates relationships among staff, faculty, and students. | 80% |

Table 3: Round 3 Strategies Required for Student Retention.

FINDINGS

The results from the study identified perspectives and insights into the challenges of student retention in higher education, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and the development of effective retention strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the study, college leaders can improve student retention by focusing on five key areas (see **Table 4**):

- Focusing on Student Engagement:** Hekmat et al. (2022) argue that student engagement is complex and deals with various areas, such as psychological, social, and cultural perspectives, but is most effective when teachers and students participate in the learning process. Engaging students inside and outside the classroom, if not applied correctly based on the student body, can be detrimental to retention.
- Creating an Environment Inclusive of Student Support:** Services and support from historical practices should be considered as a baseline and be applied to current educational practices based on student needs (Remenick, 2019). For example, campus leaders may consider conducting end-of-year review meetings with student services and student affairs departments to evaluate the effectiveness of existing support resources. These collaborative discussions can inform decisions regarding the enhancement, implementation, or modification of student support initiatives to better address evolving student needs.
- Creating a Campus Culture of Community:** Higher learning institutions must increase attention to creating healthy campus communities (Cheney et al., 2020). To build effective campus communities, leaders must understand their current demographics, which in turn will aid in the creation of programming that builds the campus culture.

- 4. Building Relationships Among Students, Staff, and Faculty:** Creating an environment in which students feel safe and comfortable can help them thrive socially and academically. Institutions should hold quarterly meetings with higher-level administration, such as a dean, provost, or campus president, to build rapport with students they do not see often. In addition, faculty should be required to hold office hours in support of students' academic success. Thriving institutions sustain their students by maintaining an environment where students are comfortable to talk and share. If students feel safe within their environment and have support outlets, the chances are higher for them to stay enrolled and succeed, supporting the campus's retention efforts.
- 5. Provide Resources Constructive to Retention Efforts:** Student support resources serve as critical mechanisms for addressing both academic and nonacademic challenges that students may encounter. Institutions should maintain a diverse array of on-campus services to meet the varied needs of their student populations. Additionally, offering alternative or supplementary resources can reinforce students' resilience and determination, thereby enhancing their likelihood of remaining enrolled and progressing toward degree completion. Resources to support student success can take various forms, including peer mentorship, individualized counseling sessions, and engagement in student organizations.

| Topics | Recommendations |
|---|---|
| Focusing on Student Engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage students in learning. Faculty interaction in the classroom. Monitor learning outcomes. Link student engagement activities to academics. |
| Creating an Environment Inclusive of Student Support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foster student support services. Student services department and academic affairs to conduct annual reviews of services. Annual curriculum reviews. |
| Creating a Campus Culture of Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify student demographics. Focus on student centered teaching and learning. Partner with community organizations and local governments. Collaborate with other colleges. |
| Building Relationships Among Students, Staff, and Faculty | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> New student orientations. Quarterly meetings with the dean, provost, or campus president. Faculty office hours. One-on-one meetings with academic counselors. Positive classroom relationships. |
| Providing Resources Constructive to Student Retention Efforts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote listings of resources. Peer-mentor connections. Campus student organizations. |

Table 4: Recommendations to Leaders and Practitioners.

CONCLUSION

Institutional leaders have long prioritized improving student retention by addressing both educational and financial barriers that impede academic progress. The implementation of effective on-campus strategies that support students' academic and personal development is essential to fostering persistence whether during the academic year or the summer

sessions. By adopting functional retention approaches and offering opportunities for skillset enhancement, colleges can promote economic mobility and reduce the likelihood of students dropping out or transferring. Over the years, research has examined a variety of retention models and theoretical frameworks to better understand and support student success. The application of these concepts enables institutions to provide more holistic and responsive support throughout the student journey.

This study contributes to the discourse on student retention in higher education by incorporating the perspectives of higher education leaders, offering nuanced insights into the systemic and interpersonal factors that influence persistence. It highlights the pivotal role of extracurricular engagement, comprehensive student support services, and the cultivation of meaningful relationships in fostering student success. Utilizing the Delphi method, the research achieved expert consensus on effective retention strategies, reinforcing the importance of institutional commitment to evidence-based practices. The findings yield actionable recommendations for higher education leaders, advocating for the strategic implementation of these approaches to strengthen retention outcomes and promote long-term student achievement.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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