STUDENT RETENTION AT NOVA AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

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The purpose of the Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment is to conduct analytical studies and provide information in support of institutional planning, policy formulation and decision making. In addition, the office provides leadership and support in research related activities to members of the NOVA community engaged in planning and evaluating the institution's success in accomplishing its mission.

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STUDENT RETENTION AT NOVA AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Abstract

This report is part of an updated series pertaining to student retention at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). In order to present an overview of student retention issues at NOVA, this report summarizes some of the key findings from retention patterns from prior studies conducted by the Office of Institutional Research (OIR). In addition to providing information on retention patterns, several “best practices”, theories on retention, and the Student Success Plan (SSP) are discussed.

Findings from prior NOVA studies that still hold true indicate that many students do not return to NOVA because of life circumstances such as family responsibilities, conflicts with employment, financial circumstances, or new employment opportunities. Many of the respondents who cited their current life circumstances as reasons for not returning indicated they planned to return to NOVA in the future. A positive finding from prior studies conducted at NOVA that continues to be validated by recent national studies show that some students do not return because they transfer or achieved their academic goals. Both of these findings are consistent with the fact that NOVA is a two-year institution and that many students enroll at the College with goals that can be met in a short period of time.

Strategies for improving retention based on previous research findings suggest that in order to improve retention at NOVA, programs reflecting the needs and circumstances of NOVA students must be designed and implemented to help students reach their academic goals. The Student Success Plan (SSP) being implemented in the Fall of 2006, will help to facilitate the success of the recommended programs. This plan lays the foundation for current and future retention efforts. Some of the strategies employed by the SSP respond to previous recommendations to improve retention, recent feedback from students and subsequent studies on College services.
STUDENT RETENTION AT NOVA AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Introduction

This report is part of an updated series on student retention at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). The Office of Institutional Research (OIR) conducted several studies on the retention of first-time students enrolled at the College during the Fall 1999 semester. The main purpose of the studies was to determine the reasons why students do not return to the College and to evaluate if selected student characteristics influence retention.

Survey research was conducted to understand the reasons that influenced students' decisions not to return to NOVA.\(^1\) Telephone surveys were conducted and focus groups were convened to gather qualitative data on what students believed were the strengths and weaknesses of their NOVA education, what factors contributed in their decision not to return, and what NOVA could have done to enable the student to re-enroll.\(^2\) An additional study sought to determine the relationship between selected student characteristics and retention rates. These characteristics were students' educational objectives, program placement and award type, the age of the students, enrollment status (full-time vs. part-time), and time of attendance (day vs. night).\(^3\)

In addition to the various studies on student retention at NOVA, a literature review was carried out in order to update NOVA's knowledge of some of the “best practices” regarding retention. Many theorists have determined key factors in both retaining students and in predicting student retention rates. The literature review also revealed some of the innovative retention programs and policies being implemented at various colleges and universities since 2001. By understanding different theories and practices, NOVA can improve its efforts in increasing student retention.

This report is divided into three sections. Section I presents a literature review on retention theories and “best practices” being conducted by other colleges and universities. Topics include theories of retention, strategies to improve retention, minority student retention, and others. Section II provides a brief description of NOVA retention patterns by selected characteristics. Some of the key findings from the NOVA studies are also compared to other researchers’ theories on student retention. Section III proposes recommendations for ways to increase retention and explains how the SSP will facilitate improved retention at NOVA. These recommendations are by no means comprehensive or final, but are offered for the purpose of triggering meaningful discussions and plans for action at NOVA.

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\(^1\) See OIR Report No. 13-00 “NOVA Non-Returning Student Survey Report” for more detailed information.
\(^2\) See OIR Report No. 18-00 “Reasons for Not Returning to NOVA: Telephone Survey and Focus Group Findings” for more information.
\(^3\) See OIR Report No. 6-00 “Retention Patterns of NOVA First-Time Students by Selected Characteristics” for more detailed information.
Section I: “Best Practices”: Strategies to Improve Student Retention

High levels of attrition can have a large, negative impact upon a college’s funding, facilities, planning, and long-term curriculum planning. Learning more about the factors that affect retention and about ways and means of improving retention can help institutions avoid the high costs of high attrition rates. With an increased understanding of why some students persist and others do not, strategies for improving student retention can be devised to enable more students to succeed in reaching their educational goals. Individuals as well as institutions benefit from finding ways to improve student retention.

Many individuals face barriers to success in college. Barriers such as inadequate financial resources, lack of preparedness, racial and gender bias, or a lack of family or peer support are all factors that can adversely affect students’ ability to obtain the post-secondary training and education they want.

Community colleges can help individuals overcome some barriers to success in college, beginning with open enrollment policies. Community colleges have become “an educational melting pot” due to open admissions and ease of accessibility (Seidman, 1995). Access, alone, however, may not be enough. The particular needs and circumstances of an increasingly diverse population must be identified and addressed by the colleges. In 1997, 46% of all minority students who were enrolled in an institution of higher education were attending two-year colleges. In the same year, women made up 58% of the community college enrollments (Foote, 2000). Because of open enrollment policies, often coupled with low tuition rates, community colleges also enroll a relatively high level of “at-risk” students, such as students from some minority groups, students with disabilities, students from low-income families, or first-generation students whose parents never attended college. These students have above-normal risks of low grade point averages and of not completing college. Community colleges also enroll large numbers of non-traditional students, whose retention rates tend to be lower than that of traditional students.

Many community colleges saw an increase in the number of dropouts during the 1980’s and early 1990’s. A 1998 study reported that there was a 46% dropout rate for open enrollment institutions (Reisberg, 1999). In 1999, ACT reported a 46% dropout rate for students enrolled in public two-year institutions and a 30% dropout rate for private two-year institutions. In addition, ACT reported the national graduation rate for students at public, two-year institutions as 34% (ACT Institutional Data File, 1999). As can be seen from these statistics and others, high attrition rates are a nationwide problem of major proportions. Retaining students, at as high a rate as possible, is critical both for education institutions and the students who attend them. Researchers have long studied the problem and continue to do so. At institutions of higher education, enrollment management and student retention strategies are employed in ongoing efforts to improve student retention.

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4 Open enrollment was defined as admitting all high school graduates, to capacity.
Enrollment Management

Enrollment management is a methodology by which higher education institutions control the size, shape, and character of their student bodies. It begins with the president of the institution and extends through the entire organization. Enrollment management is a comprehensive process employed to achieve and maintain student recruitment, retention, and graduation rates. The primary goals of enrollment management include stabilizing enrollments, linking student service programs and academic programs, maintaining institutional finances, improving student services, and responding to economic forces. It is a planned effort, which takes full implementation and long-term commitments in order to be effective.

According to Frank Kemerer of North Texas State University, enrollment management is made up of several activities. These activities include long range planning, program development, clear mission statements, marketing efforts, and recruitment. In addition, Kreutner and Godfrey define enrollment management as planned activities, which can control an institution's future. The four primary components of enrollment management are 1) marketing services 2) enrollment services 3) retention services and 4) research services (Mabry, 1999).

Theories of Student Retention

One of the most prominent theorists on student retention is Vincent Tinto. Tinto's theory of student retention was first published in 1975 and has been widely tested and accepted by the educational community. The Tinto model states that individuals possess pre-entry college attributes including such things as family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling. These attributes influence individuals' choice of goals and commitments. Institutional experiences then interact with students' goals and commitments. Whether a student departs from an institution is largely a result of the extent to which the student becomes academically and socially connected with the institution.

The Tinto model was developed primarily for student retention issues at four-year colleges. In 1990, Halpin and Altinasi tested Tinto's model on two-year, non-residential, open-door community colleges. The results were very similar to the results from Tinto's model, showing that retention is a complex issue involving many variables. In particular, retention is influenced by the interplay of student attributes and beliefs with institutional characteristics.

Models similar to Tinto's have been proposed and tested by other theorists. Pascarella and Terenzini (1979) stated that the absence of significant interactions with other college members is the single leading predictor of college attrition. Student interaction must go beyond the classroom in order for students to feel integrated. Integration is an important component for retaining all students, and it is particularly important in retaining minority students. For Black students, Braddock (1998) found that the amount of faculty contact affects retention and academic performance. This was especially true for Black students enrolled at predominately White institutions.

A study conducted by Okun & Benin in 1996 analyzed retention rates for two groups of community college students. The two groups were those students with plans to persist and those students with plans to transfer. The results of the study showed that the best
indicators of persistence were higher GPA upon entry to the institution, enrollment in several classes, intention to persist at entrance, and encouragement from family and peers to continue in their studies. The findings of the study also show that student characteristics have a very strong influence over retention at community colleges. Community colleges can influence persistence levels by encouraging students to take more classes and by strengthening family and peer support systems.

Methods of Measuring Retention

According to Tinto, student persistence can be measured or defined as either program, student, or course retention. Program retention is the traditional way to evaluate attrition rates, in which full-time, first-time students are evaluated. Program retention measures whether or not the student graduated in the major intended at entrance. Student retention evaluates whether or not students attained their personal and/or academic goals upon exiting the college. This type of data is more difficult to obtain because it relies on questionnaire data and some students do not have to obtain a degree in order to attain their personal goals. Course retention is measured by determining the number of students enrolled in a particular course and then evaluating how many students successfully completed the course. This method gives a bigger picture and does not distinguish between full- and part-time students. Courses with higher than average attrition rates can be examined and analyzed. This methodology can provide very useful data to a college.

Strategies to Improve Retention

Ernest Pascarella states there are several steps that organizations must take in order to produce effective retention programs. First, retention efforts must be systematic throughout the entire organization. One effective method to achieve this is to develop college-wide task forces pertaining to retention. This ensures that retention efforts are pervasive throughout the organization. Second, on-going research pertaining to student behaviors must be conducted. Rather than just proposing ideas or theories regarding student behaviors, the organization must find out what students are actually doing. Third, the institution must determine which factors in the organization correlate to student persistence or withdrawal. Administrators need to find the specific, unique factors influencing retention at their institution. Fourth, retention interventions need to be developed and their implementation verified. Fifth, the retention interventions should be evaluated, with attention given to both the indirect and direct effects of the programs. Lastly, Pascarella states that it is important for organizations to realize that not all attrition is negative. For example, many students who enroll at community colleges intend to transfer to other institutions, in which case attrition is considered positive.

There are many factors that have been found to influence retention and to be strongly associated with student persistence. These factors include initial student commitments, peer support, involvement in the institution’s academic life, and frequency and quality of faculty-student interaction. A closer examination of these variables shows that their influence on student retention varies substantially among institutions. Practices that have increased student persistence at one institution cannot be automatically applied at other institutions. Higher education organizations need to analyze the specific qualities and characteristics of their own students. The most beneficial and effective retention programs are those that are developed over time and are based on coordinated activities of continuous research, evaluation, and policy development.
There are three general levels of retention efforts that both institutions and students can employ: the student level, the institutional level, and the community level. At the student level students must be challenged to develop both academic and non-academic skills that they need for college. At the institutional level teachers and administrators participate in behaviors that facilitate persistence and program completion. In addition, institutions must make commitments to students by providing financial assistance. The community level incorporates businesses, which form partnerships with colleges in order to assist at-risk students.

In 1993, Seidman presented a methodology to evaluate student outcomes at community colleges. The methodology recognizes that students attend community colleges for various reasons, not just to receive degrees. An important element in Seidman’s methodology includes learning as much as possible about new students, so that programs can be created or modified to meet their needs. College application forms should be designed to collect data on the goals of students and their academic, social, economic, and family backgrounds. High schools should also provide information to community colleges. Obtaining information early can help students find the proper support systems and programs. Early information also allows the college to develop appropriate programs.

Many institutions have developed and integrated different tools to help improve student retention. Orientation classes and programs are common retention devices. Orientation programs can provide students with vital information important for their academic socialization. A study conducted by Glass and Garrett (1995) at four community colleges in North Carolina found that completing an orientation course (during the first semester of enrollment) improved retention rates regardless of the gender, race, major, age, or employment status of the students (Brawer, 1999).

Peer and faculty mentoring programs have also been found to be effective retention strategies. Many peer mentoring programs focus on providing social and academic support. For example, Valencia Community College found that when faculty mentoring was combined with student orientation courses, student retention rates increased by 10% more than when orientation courses alone were used (Brawer, 1999).

Many higher education institutions use multiple strategies to increase student retention rates. Multiple strategies might include combining orientation programs, mentoring programs, and faculty training. Allegheny Community College proposed a multiple strategy to improve retention. Activities included establishing a women’s center, conducting freshman seminars to promote relationships among students and faculty, creating college funded work-study programs for on-campus employment, beginning faculty development programs, and creating additional student organizations (Brawer, 1999).

Many colleges try to get freshman students involved in campus activities with the expectation that involving students in campus activities will increase persistence rates. Southwest Texas State University began a leadership program for Hispanic students. The program targeted Hispanic students because they were leaving the University in higher proportions than other freshmen. The program consisted of Hispanic upperclassmen and Hispanic faculty members helping incoming freshmen adjust to college life. Since the program began, retention of Hispanic freshmen students (from freshman to sophomore) increased from 58% in 1995 to 68% in 1997 (Reisberg, 1999).
Attrition is believed to be caused by an extremely complex interaction of a multitude of variables, not just academics. When colleges try to attribute low retention rates to one variable, efforts usually fail. Literature findings state that students at community colleges are four times more likely to leave school due to non-academic reasons than for academic reasons (Jones, 1986). The challenge for community colleges is to increase the number of first-time students and returning students (re-enrollment) without establishing costly, labor-intensive programs. Colleges should make faculty and staff aware of high risk students. One way to do this is to hold workshops on high risk students where strategies to help these students can be discussed. If faculty and staff are aware of students at high risk, intervention techniques can be used. In addition, the high cost of student attrition should be made known to all faculty and staff. Steven Jones, in his article titled, “No Magic Required: Reducing Freshman Attrition at Community Colleges,” suggests calculating the full-time equivalent student (FTES) who have dropped out of the last four freshmen classes. This figure should include both full-time and part-time students for not only lost tuition funds, but also formula funding revenues as well. By placing a dollar value on attrition, many faculty and staff will become more committed to retention strategies and programs. Colleges need to recognize that simply having retention programs in place does not automatically increase student persistence levels. Programs must be delivered in a timely manner and with appropriate attitudes if retention programs are to succeed.

Learning Communities and Retention

Although retention research and findings have been published over the past twenty years, there has been little change in retention rates for either four-year or two-year institutions. Student development departments have changed in order to retain students, but there has been little change in academic practices designed to promote higher levels of student retention. In general, education has been unaffected by research that has been conducted on student persistence.

It has been found that both academic and social involvement is important for students. In particular, involvement matters most during the first year of enrollment. Nearly 50% of all students who withdraw from college do so before the start of the second year (Brawer, 1999). The more academically and socially involved students are on campus, the more likely they will be to persist with their college studies. Academic and social integration often influence retention in different ways for different people. Overall, academic integration appears to be the more important form of involvement, especially for students enrolled at two-year institutions. This is because classrooms and labs are typically the primary place for social integration at two-year institutions. Academic involvement at two-year institutions should be exceptionally strong because many students do not participate in social activities typically found in four-year colleges.

In his report titled “Colleges as Communities: Taking Research on Student Persistence Seriously,” Vincent Tinto suggests that colleges should adopt a community model of academic organization in which shared, connected learning experiences are promoted. The “community model of academics” as it is referred to, would have forms of academic instruction that require students to interact with other students in learning. An example is “learning communities” where students register for a block of classes together. The same students take two or more courses together and form a study team. The courses are connected by a theme. By enrolling in courses together, students share a coherent educational experience. Students in learning communities form supportive peer groups,
which help them to become both academically and socially connected. This is especially helpful for students who commute to college and for those students who face barriers to success in higher education.

For commuting and non-traditional students enrolled at two-year institutions, retention strategies must be applied in the classroom. The classroom is the only place where these students and faculty meet. Retention programs that occur outside of the classroom do not typically reach all of the students who could benefit.

In addition to providing shared learning experiences for students, faculty must also have shared learning opportunities. Institutions must remove barriers that prevent faculty collaborations across departments. Faculty must be able to easily access shared learning experiences and be able to support each other in the process of educational reforms.

An example of a learning community is at Seattle Central Community College, where students can enroll in the Coordinated Studies Program. Enrollees take courses together and then the group meets two or three times a week, for 4 to 6 hours per meeting. The students in the Coordinated Studies Program were retained at a rate approximately 25% higher than students enrolled in traditional curriculums (Tinto, 1998).

After evaluating a rising trend in student attrition rates, Old Dominion University in Virginia implemented learning communities for freshman students. Many of the students were identified as “at-risk” based on a freshman survey. Learning communities were formed based on freshman English composition courses. The success of the learning communities increased retention, with the student attrition levels decreasing from 33% in 1995 to 24% in 1998 (Virginia Assessment Group, 1999).

Recruitment and Retention

Research has shown that students will persist at a college if there is a high level of congruence between the student’s values, goals, and attitudes and those of the college. The admissions process and materials can be a key factor in developing students’ expectations of the institution and in their adjustment to college environments. Many prestigious private and public universities report a high rate of retention, which can be partially attributed to the students’ self-selection. Self-selection increases the compatibility between the student and the institution, thus increasing retention rates (Seidman, 1989). Colleges should improve the information they disseminate to prospective students. This, in turn, will allow students to make a more accurate selection on which colleges to attend, and therefore increase retention rates.

Tinto and Wallace (1986) and Grites (1979) found that institutional/student congruence or “fit” could be done at the time of college selection. This “fit” can minimize the chance of a student choosing the wrong institution and thus increase retention rates. Tinto and Wallace also found that admissions officers should inform students and help them to have reasonable expectations regarding their education. This will help prevent student disappointment with the institution after enrollment. The recruitment process is related to retention efforts, with admissions officers playing an important role.

Alan Seidman conducted a study to measure the positive effects of both pre-admission and post-admission counseling for students enrolled in two-year community colleges.
According to Seidman (1989), “Matching student attributes with institutional attributes will contribute to student satisfaction with the institution. This in turn, will reflect positively on the institution as satisfied customers relate their positive experiences to others” (p. 4). Seidman (1989) states that the retention process begins with the admissions process. The information disseminated by the admissions office is critical in a student’s adjustment to the institution. The findings from the study indicated that students who received pre-admission and post-admission counseling had a higher degree of success than those students who did not receive counseling. Students who received counseling returned for the second semester of enrollment (spring) at a slightly higher rate than the control group (87% to 85% respectively). By the third semester of enrollment (fall), there was a larger difference in retention rates. Students who received counseling returned at a 88% rate compared to the control group which had a 68% return rate. These findings agreed with other studies and literature reviews, which state that academic advising programs help to increase retention rates. In particular, Seidman’s study showed that pre-admission and post-admission counseling and orientation produces higher retention rates over multiple semesters.

Strategies for Improving Adult Student Retention

Unlike traditional students, adult learners usually do not live on campus, many are married with children, and most work full time. Most adult learners have very little social interaction at college; instead, they have social links to organizations outside of the college community. Therefore, it is very important for colleges to integrate adult students into on-campus social activities.

A second characteristic of adult learners is that career advancement is usually the primary motivation for attending college. Therefore, having a “career culture” at college may be a key factor in retaining adult students. Usually, career advancement is a more motivating factor for adult students than the need for growth or self-development. Ashar and Skenes (1993) tested Tinto’s model on adult students. The results showed that fostering social interaction and the social environment needs to take place in the classroom. If social interaction occurs in the class setting, retention will increase.

Retention must be re-defined from the traditional definition of program completion when dealing with adult students. Degree completion is the goal for some but not all adult students. Adults are generally more concerned with the “hands-on” applicability of a degree, have a greater sense of responsibility than younger students, and have more varied experiences to draw upon.

Adult student persistence is affected by such things as time management, family and work needs, economic barriers, and logistics. Several theorists have developed ideas pertaining to adult student retention. Stark states that for adult students, it is more important to define “academic integration as intellectual development rather than good grades.” Furthermore, social integration means group work, studying together, and contact with fellow students rather than joining social groups or campus activities (Kerka, 1989).

Retention is a result of a combination of circumstances, student characteristics, and the institutional environment. For educators, the most viable way to improve retention is to modify the institutional environment. Pappas and Loring (1985) have proposed defining
retention for adults in a cross-sectional perspective. This view would consider adult retention successful if students achieve their own objectives for attending college, whether or not that included obtaining a degree.

Both adult students and institutions can engage in activities that increase student retention rates. Adults can overcome retention barriers by focusing on their role as students. Institutions of higher education can assist adults in overcoming retention barriers through several activities. These activities might include assuring close correspondence and monitoring of both instructional and student objectives, providing faculty training in adult student education, offering more courses in the evenings and weekends, expanding course locations, and giving credit for prior learning experiences.

According to Kerka (1989), there are three important strategies for retaining adult students. First, it should be recognized that diverse groups of students are retained by different methods. Second, either before or after enrollment, adult students should be encouraged to clarify career and academic goals. Third, institutions should recognize that not all students’ objectives include obtaining a degree and that measuring retention success should take that into account.

Strategies for Improving Minority Student Retention

Approximately 56% of all college-bound Hispanic students attend community colleges (Avalos, 1999). However, relatively few of the 56% of Hispanic students obtain a postsecondary degree, making retention and transfer issues very important (Avalos, 1999). Fields (1988) found that some of the reasons for attrition of Hispanic students included financial reasons, lack of motivation, time conflicts, lack of academic preparation, and inability to cope with college demands. Walker (1988) looked at 145 community colleges to see how they were improving retention rates for Hispanic students. The majority of the retention increases were due to financial aid grants, career counseling in selective programs, and participation in ESL and Hispanic studies classes (Avalos, 1999).

It has been found that the two main factors that influence Hispanic student retention, are financial aid and academic support. A study conducted by Amaury Nora (1990), evaluated whether campus and non-campus based financial aid influenced Hispanic student retention at community colleges. Both of these factors (campus and non-campus based financial support) were found to be significant in retention. The findings indicate that Hispanic students withdraw from college because of financial reasons more than for academic reasons. Nora (1990) stated that Hispanic students that received higher levels of non-campus and campus-based financial aid were enrolled for more semesters, earned more credits, and received some type of credential when compared to Hispanic students that did not receive some sort of financial aid. Another study conducted by Olivas found that Hispanic students with financial aid were uninformed about their parents’ income levels. In addition, many students overestimated their parents’ income, thus reducing their financial aid award amounts. Also, a large proportion of the Hispanic students held Pell Grants as their form of financial aid, causing them to rely heavily on federal monies and thus be subject to federal cutbacks. When federal aid cuts have occurred, they have disproportionally affected Hispanic students.

Colleges must consider the nature of Hispanic community college students. Many two-year college students who are Hispanic come from lower socioeconomic families and
from families where “college attendance has not been firmly established” (Nora, 1990). Colleges need to develop a comprehensive financial aid plan for students. Financial aid opportunities need to be widely publicized and marketed, especially towards minority students and their parents. Parents and students should also be informed about the importance of correctly filling out financial aid applications and the importance of selecting a comprehensive financial aid package.

Transfer is often cited as an issue in retention of Hispanic community college students. In order to improve transfer rates for Hispanic students, Cohen (1984) suggested several actions. These include the following: strengthening articulation agreements with four-year institutions, implementing stronger counseling and remediation services, and improving special activities for Hispanic students that increase peer support (Avalos, 1999).

Two successful retention programs described by Avalos include the Puente Project and the Enlace Program. The Puente Project employs Hispanic counselors, specially trained English instructors, and Hispanic professionals who act as mentors. Both of these programs provide Hispanic students with nontraditional individualized academic instruction, counseling, and personal contact with Hispanic professionals as mentors. The Puente Project has been implemented in 23 California community colleges. Students are admitted to the program by placing them in a remedial level English course. The main portion of the program centers on a two-semester sequence of English courses taught by an English instructor and a Hispanic counselor. The students enrolled in the Puente Project are also assigned mentors within the Hispanic community who have similar occupational interests. In addition, Puente students also have a very strong peer support system.

Raymond Padilla and Jesus Trevino (1997) conducted a study examining the successful behavior traits of minority students who remained in college. Instead of focusing on why students drop out, this study examined the positive attributes of graduates and what actions minority students took in order to graduate from college. The study determined four barriers that minority students had to overcome in order to remain in college. The barriers included: discontinuity (e.g., rural to urban transition), lack of nurturing (e.g., lack of family support, lack of minority role models), lack of presence (e.g., cultural isolation, lack of minority issues in curriculums), and lack of resources (e.g., lack of money, unfamiliarity with financial aid system). Successful minority students took actions and practiced certain behaviors in order to overcome these barriers. These actions included building a support system by creating or joining clubs, increasing independence by making their own decisions and taking reasonable risks, and conducting research on the profitability of their chosen majors or careers.

Brent Mallinckrodt (1988) studied differences in the retention of Black and White students. In an article titled “Student Retention, Social Support, and Dropout Intention: Comparison of Black and White Students,” he reports on his study of Black and White students in a four-year university. This study was designed to determine what factors influenced student retention. The study found that the most effective methods of increasing retention rates differed between Black and White students. It was determined that family support was the most important factor for White student retention. Conversely, campus support (faculty, staff, peers) was found to be the most important support system for Black students. In particular, “groups that provide strong peer support as well as concrete survival skills for new Black students may be one of the
most effective ways of helping these students cope with the stresses of adjusting to college” (Mallinckrodt, 1988).

Successful Retention Programs

Many community colleges have implemented successful programs in order to increase retention. One example is Sinclair Community College. This college uses an online Student Tracking Systems, called Student Success Plan (SSP) for counselors to track the progress of “at-risk” students. The system was developed in house and was a collaborative effort on the part of the staff, faculty, and IT department. The system screens all new students for risk of failure based on placement in two or more developmental courses, earning poverty-level income, an undecided major, and whether or not they are working full-time. Based on the assessment, the appropriate linkages are made to ensure the student receives the support they need. Further, Sinclair Community College applies additional resources to gatekeeper classes. Gatekeeper classes are developmental courses. By focusing additional resources on students in these courses, they have found that it improves the chances they will complete their program of study (MAGNA, 2005).

Another example of an institution implementing effective retention strategies is Utah State University (USU). USU conducted a telephone survey to determine why students were leaving. From their data, they surmised that students were leaving to fulfill military and religious obligations. Consequently, USU created leave of absence programs which would enable the student to meet their educational and personal goal simultaneously. USU also implemented a series of follow-up practices to keep in close contact with student to ensure they did not miss important dates and deadlines. The follow-up practices include email reminders to register for classes and telephone calls are made to students with a 3.5 GPA or better who have not registered to determine if they will be returning to the university. They also conduct focus groups as part of their follow-up practices. The focus group is comprised of first-year and transfer students. The university uses the focus group findings to understand the experiences of these students and improve university services. Finally, USU also offers “retention scholarships to students who apply with a semester-by-semester plan for completing their degree” (Noel-Levitz, 2006).

The Oklahoma Higher Education Task Force on Student Retention has generated a variety of retention strategies after careful review of internal and nationwide best practices. One of these strategies is the early alert system. The early alert system tracks absences and alerts advisors of poor performing students. By monitoring absences and attendance, potential issues can be warded off. Flexible course scheduling is another strategy used to improve retention. A third strategy is Fast Track Academic Programs. These programs enable students to complete full programs of study in shorter periods of time. For working adults or individuals with personal responsibilities that prohibit them from making a full two-year or four-year commitment, greater success is found in these types of programs. A fourth strategy recommended by the Oklahoma Higher Education Task Force on Student Retention was to create a college wide council that fosters communication and coordinates collaboration among staff. “Expansion of student activities to provide more social interaction and extracurricular learning opportunities” (Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, 2002, p. 34) is another strategy the Oklahoma Higher Education Task Force on Student Retention recommended implementing. Programs that recognized students that were
actively involved in both in-class and out-of-class activities and programs that “involved students as leaders of academic activities” (Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, 2002, p. 25) were also recommended.

The taskforce findings were published in 2002. Many of these strategies were employed. In 2005 Oklahoma State University (OSU) received the Lee Noel and Randi Levitz Retention Excellence Awards. OSU had created a culture that changed the learning environment generated by a faculty and staff that worked towards a “common goal” (Noel-Levitz, 2006, ¶ 3). What resulted was a “Faculty/Staff Innovation Center that work[ed] to integrate technological instructional strategies [that] addressed the needs of the under prepared at-risk student” (Noel-Levitz, 2006, ¶ 2).

Conclusion

As has been shown, there are several prominent theories on student retention. The Tinto model is one of the most widely accepted models on student retention for both two-year and four-year institutions. This model states that pre-enrollment attributes such as family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling shape students' goals and commitments. The interaction between students’ goals and commitments and their institutional experiences affects persistence and the extent to which students become academically and socially connected to the institution.

Following Tinto’s theories of student retention, it has been shown that institutions must identify high risk students, improve faculty-student contacts, and improve academic integration for students. In particular, community colleges should focus attention on adult students and minority students because they make up a larger proportion of the student population at community colleges compared to four-year institutions.

There are many specific strategies which community colleges have developed and implemented in order to improve student retention rates. Literature and experience have shown that any one solution will not work for every institution. It is vital that colleges conduct research and develop strategies suited to improving student persistence at their own institution.
Section II: Student Retention at NOVA

In an effort to evaluate student retention at NOVA, the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) conducted several analyses in 2001. The intent of the analyses was to determine why students do not return to the College and to identify groups of students who have had either traditionally low or high retention rates. By determining the various reasons that students do not return, the College institutes policies and practices to aid students in attaining their educational objectives.

Student retention can be defined by a wide variety of methods, including program retention and student retention. As defined by Vincent Tinto, program retention examines whether a full-time, first-time student graduates in a major selected when he/she first enrolls at the institution. Student retention evaluates whether students attain their personal goals while enrolled at a college or university. The Office of Institutional Research at NOVA examined retention rates according to these two definitions. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in order to determine retention rates for groups of NOVA students and to determine why students leave the institution. The following sections provide summary information on three NOVA studies pertaining to retention and how the findings relate to retention theories.

Retention at NOVA by Selected Characteristics

The Office of Institutional Research (OIR) conducted an evaluation of the retention rates for first-time students to determine whether selected student characteristics influenced retention. The evaluation examined the relationship between retention and characteristics such as educational objectives, program placement and award type, student age, enrollment status, and time of class attendance. The analysis pertained only to first-time students who attended NOVA for one semester (fall) and who did not return the following spring semester.\(^5\)

Students who indicated that transferring to another institution was their primary educational objective had a high retention rate of 64%. This contrasts sharply with the retention rate (37%) of students who indicated that their educational objective was self-improvement. In addition, students who indicated they would be enrolling at NOVA for three to four semesters had high retention rates of approximately 65%. In contrast, 30% of the students who indicated they would only be enrolled at NOVA for one semester returned. These retention rates indicate that students who are attending NOVA for personal enrichment reasons are generally not returning at high rates as compared to students who have longer term academic goals such as transferring. This trend is not necessarily negative for NOVA. Institutions with open-enrollment policies have many students who attend for personal enrichment reasons; low retention rates are not necessarily a poor reflection of the institution as students frequently meet their objectives in a short period of time.

\(^5\) See OIR report, “Retention Patterns of NOVA First-Time Students by Selected Characteristics, No. 6-00” for a detailed description of the analysis.
Students at NOVA who were program placed in their first semester of enrollment had higher retention rates than non-program placed students. The highest retention rates were for students enrolled in an Associate in Science degree program (65%). The retention rate for students who did not select a program was less than 51%. By encouraging first-time students to select a program, NOVA may be able to increase student retention rates.

In general, younger students returned to NOVA at a higher rate than older students. Students 21 years of age and younger had an overall retention rate of 66%. This compares to a retention rate of 40% for students 45 years of age and older. The lower retention rate of older students could reflect the tendency of older students to enroll for purposes of personal enrichment or for upgrading job skills, purposes that require only short periods of time at NOVA. Lower retention rates might also reflect the heavier work and family commitments of older students.

Students who were enrolled full-time had higher retention rates than part-time students. This factor was true regardless of the students’ age. Specifically, full-time students had a retention rate of approximately 75% compared to part-time students who had a retention rate of 44%. In particular, full-time students who were 21 years of age and younger had one of the highest retention rates at 77%.

An analysis of student retention rates at NOVA by time of class attendance, indicated that students who attended both day and night classes had high retention rates. Sixty-seven percent of the students who attended both day and night classes returned the following spring semester compared to 39% of the students enrolled only in night classes.

**NOVA Retention Rates in Relation to National Retention Rates**

Positive Retention Rates

Ernest Pascarella, a major theorist on student retention, stated there are several steps which organizations must take in order to produce effective retention programs. Some of these steps include having retention efforts pervasive throughout the entire organization, continuous research on student retention, and identifying specific factors affecting retention. Pascarella also states that it is important for organizations to realize that not all attrition is negative. Many students who enroll at community colleges intend to transfer to other institutions, in which case attrition is considered positive.

Pascarella’s theory is important in relation to the findings from the NOVA Non-Returning Student Survey. Overall, 9% of the respondents stated the single most important reason for not returning to NOVA was because they had transferred to another school. This type of student attrition is positive in nature because these students continued their education. In addition, 8% of the survey respondents stated they did not return because they had achieved their educational goals. This demonstrates that NOVA is assisting some students in accomplishing short-term goals. It is important to discover the reasons why students do not continue their enrollment at an institution in order to assess the extent to which attrition is negative or positive.
Student Goals and Retention Rates

In their article, “Staying in College: Moderators of the Relation Between Intention and Institutional Departure,” Okun and Benin state that some of the best indicators of retention are students with higher GPA’s at enrollment, intention to persist at entrance, and enrollment in several courses. These same factors also appeared to be good indicators of student retention rates at NOVA. When retention rates for first-time students were analyzed by degree intention, approximately 61% of the students who intended on obtaining a degree were retained. This compares to a retention rate of approximately 48% for students who had no degree intention upon enrolling at NOVA. Retention rates were also analyzed by the number of semesters the students intended to enroll at NOVA. Students who indicated they would attend NOVA for three to four semesters had retention rates of approximately 65%. This compares to a retention rate of approximately 30% for students who indicated they would enroll at NOVA for one semester. In each of these cases, retention rates could be predicted according to the students’ intention to persist at entrance.

Similar to intention to persist, enrollment in several courses was also a good indicator of student retention rates at NOVA. Full-time students (those enrolled in 12 or more credit hours) had higher retention rates than part-time students. Specifically, the retention rate for full-time students was approximately 75% compared to part-time students who had retention rates of approximately 45%. The Okun and Benin theory, that student retention levels can be predicted by enrollment in several courses, was reflected in the NOVA analysis of first-time students.

External Factors Influencing Retention Rates

According to Steven Jones (1986) in his article titled “No Magic Required: Reducing Freshman Attrition at the Community College,” students enrolled in community colleges are four times more likely to leave the school due to non-academic reasons than for academic reasons. The findings from the Non-Returning Student Survey agreed with this theory. Specifically, approximately 3% of the respondents stated academic reasons were the single most important factor in their decision not to return to NOVA. In contrast, 15% of the respondents cited family or personal circumstances as their primary reason for not returning. Overall, the findings from the Non-Returning Student Survey indicated that approximately 48% of the respondents did not return to NOVA due to personal circumstances. This area included such things as family commitments, conflicts with employment, and new employment opportunities. It is more difficult for formal retention programs developed by NOVA to assist students in these areas than in academic or other areas under the College’s control.

Respondents to the telephone survey who cited personal circumstances as reasons for not returning most often explained that various responsibilities unrelated to school prevented them from returning. “Work, children, and illness in the family” were the reasons for not returning given by one respondent, illustrating the multiple roles of many survey respondents. Several respondents stated that their various responsibilities hardly left them time to attend class, let alone study. In addition to family and personal responsibilities, many respondents cited conflict with employment as a main reason for not returning. Work-related reasons for not returning generally fell into two categories: scheduling conflicts, and a lack of time for meeting the obligations of both work and school. These findings and others from the telephone survey confirmed Steven Jones’
finding that students enrolled at community colleges are more likely to discontinue enrollment because of non-academic reasons than because of academic reasons.

Student Connection with the School

According to Florence Brawer (1999), the more academically and socially involved students are with an institution, the more likely they will persist with their academic studies. Overall, Brawer stated that academic integration is more important than social integration for students enrolled at two-year community colleges. This is because classrooms are typically the only place for social integration at community colleges. Academic integration should be strong in the classroom because students do not have access to as many social activities and groups as do students at four-year institutions.

Brawer’s theory of academic integration was exemplified in the analysis conducted at NOVA. First-time students who were program placed had higher retention rates than non-program placed students. Over 60% of the program placed students returned to NOVA as compared to approximately 50% of the non-program placed students. Among the students who were program placed, students enrolled in a program leading to an Associate in Science degree had the highest retention rate (65%). It can be seen that NOVA students who were academically integrated within a curriculum had higher retention rates than other students.

Student Age and Retention Rates

Retention patterns have been shown to vary according to the age of the student. As compared to younger students, adult students differ in their primary goals of attending a college or university. Retention definitions should reflect the various goals of students according to their age and purpose of enrollment. Research findings have shown that adult student persistence is affected by factors such as time management, family and work needs, and logistics. These factors may have less influence on retention rates for younger students. According to Pappas and Loring, retention for adult students should be defined as achieving their stated objectives, which may or may not include obtaining a degree (Kerka, 1989).

Data gathered from the NOVA Non-Returning Student Survey reflected differences in retention according to student age. For respondents between 18 to 24 years of age, the most important reason for not returning was finance related. However, older respondents (between 25 to 44 years of age), gave both conflicts with employment and family/personal circumstances more often as reasons for not returning. It appears that as the respondent’s age increased, financial barriers decreased but family or personal barriers grew. Programs and efforts to improve retention rates should take into consideration that barriers in attending college could differ based upon the age of the student.

When retention rates were analyzed for three cohorts of NOVA first-time students, differences also emerged according to age. Students 21 years of age and younger had retention rates of approximately 66%. This compares to students 45 years of age and older who had retention rates of 40%. Again, older students may have had barriers to their education that did not exist for younger students. Family and personal circumstances may have prevented more older students from returning than younger students. Determining the educational goals of older students could help the College
better assess the rate of positive attrition. Perhaps many of the students 45 years of age and older did not return to NOVA because they had achieved their goals.

Influences of Financial Aid on Retention Rates

Fourteen percent of the respondents to the Non-Returning Student Survey stated financial circumstances were the main reason for not returning to NOVA. In addition, many of the responses to the open-ended questions on the Non-Returning Student Survey pertained to financial issues. When the responses to the survey were analyzed by the race of the respondents, differences emerged. Approximately 13% of the White respondents stated that financial reasons were the most important factor in their decision not to return to NOVA. This compares to 20% of the Hispanic respondents who indicated financial circumstances were the primary reason for not returning.

The results of the NOVA survey closely parallel the findings from a study conducted by Amaury Nora. In the article titled “Campus-Based Aid Programs as Determinants of Retention Among Hispanic Community College Students,” Nora states that both financial aid and academic support strongly influence retention rates for Hispanic students. The findings from the study indicated that Hispanic students discontinue college enrollment because of financial reasons more often than for academic reasons. Nora recommends that financial aid opportunities and packages be marketed strongly, especially to minority students.
Section III: Recommendations & The Student Success Plan

In order to improve student retention at NOVA, comprehensive programs need to be developed and implemented at the College. Through studies conducted by OIR, several key findings and trends regarding student retention at NOVA have been determined. These findings should be the basis of programs aimed at increasing student retention and assisting continuing students. By identifying factors affecting student retention at the College, programs can be strengthened or initiated in order to help students continue at NOVA.

Recommendations based on previous findings

One of the major findings from retention studies revealed that the non-returning students felt that NOVA did not provide them with enough information about the College. This included providing timely, accurate, and readily available information regarding College services and processes. Many students who did not return to the College indicated that an increased availability of information would have been helpful to them in their efforts to continue at NOVA.

In order to help improve retention, various NOVA offices need to ensure that students have information regarding services available to them. This includes such areas as academic, personal and career counseling, placement testing, financial aid, admissions and records, and academic and social support services. The manner in which critical information is disseminated should be evaluated and strengthened to benefit students (particularly new students). NOVA offices need to determine whether students are actually using and easily accessing information regarding services that are necessary for their success at the College. It should also be noted that various techniques or strategies to improve the dissemination of information might vary from campus to campus. Efforts to improve retention should be suited to particular offices and NOVA campuses.

Other efforts to improve the availability of information to students include developing a new student orientation package. A product such as this could include information on admissions and records services, placement testing, counseling services, tutoring information, financial aid information, parking information, library services and hours, and other critical services. By providing a simple, easy-to-read orientation package, many new students may feel more comfortable and be able to make the transition into college.

A second important finding regarding student retention at NOVA was that a disproportional number of Hispanic students are not returning to the College due to financial reasons. As stated earlier, approximately 20% of the Hispanic respondents gave financial circumstances as the most important reason for not returning to NOVA. This compares to 13% of the White respondents, 15% of the Black respondents, and 14% of the Asian respondents who gave financial circumstances as the most important reason for not returning. This NOVA finding supports other national studies, which have found that Hispanic students more often discontinue college enrollment because of financial reasons than for academic reasons.

In order to improve the retention of Hispanic students at NOVA, greater efforts must be made to ensure that Hispanic students know about the types of financial aid available
and how to apply for aid. NOVA marketing efforts aimed at prospective Hispanic students should emphasize the opportunities for financial aid that are available so that individuals with inadequate funds for education are aware that they might be eligible for student loans, grants, or scholarships.

In addition to assisting Hispanic students, efforts should be made to improve the retention of Black students at NOVA. National studies have indicated that support from the institution appears to be a critical factor in retaining Black students. Students need to have a sense of belonging to NOVA based on their interaction with faculty, counselors, and student associations that are sensitive to their needs.

A third finding from the retention studies conducted at NOVA was that approximately 62% of the respondents did not return to the College due to their current life circumstances. The most frequently stated life circumstances that influenced respondents’ decisions not to return included financial reasons, family reasons, conflicts with employment, and new employment opportunities. Time, money, and family commitments led many students to temporarily stop their education. Many of the respondents who cited life circumstances for not returning indicated they planned to return to NOVA in the future. The challenge to NOVA will be to expand its efforts in assisting students who must balance family and/or work obligations with school.

As found in several national studies, not all student attrition is negative for an institution. This is particularly true for community colleges, with open enrollment policies and large populations of adult students. Almost one-fifth of the respondents to the Non-Returning Student Survey had either transferred to another institution or had achieved their academic goals. This is an important factor that should be incorporated into retention programs at NOVA. Efforts to increase “positive attrition” can be done by offering as many courses as possible at convenient locations and times, allowing more students to pursue their academic objectives. Students who plan to transfer should receive guidance on what program of study to follow at NOVA and should be aware of the transfer articulation agreements that NOVA has with various four-year institutions. The ability for students to easily access information on transferring to other institutions should be a key component in retention efforts at NOVA.

The Student Success Plan

Analysis from previous retention studies recommended the development and implementation of comprehensive programs to address retention. In the Fall of 2006, the College will implement the Student Success Plan (SSP). The SSP is a combination of institutional, campus-wide, and campus-specific policies and procedures. These policies and procedures address some of the issues found to affect retention. As a strategy to improve retention, the SSP creates an overarching system that is responsive to the needs of the general student body, while at the same time meeting the needs specific to the students on individual campuses. To address issues related to retention based on past studies, the SSP will implement the following policies and procedures. These are just a few of the initiatives geared toward improving student success and retention.
Institutional

- “Development of a comprehensive communication plan in which the college is proactive in providing students with general and specific follow-up communications through clearly defined channels and media.
- ‘Organizations of the campus one-stop Student Services Centers to provide a consistent array of services to continuing students.’
- ‘Rewriting narrative in Schedule of Classes to speak more distinctly to the needs of new students as well as to the needs of continuing students.’
- ‘A systemic follow-up…to include providing specific information and identifying appropriate contacts related to the choice of program made by the student.”

Campus-wide*

- Strategies to target students while still in high school (e.g. dual enrollment program with Fairfax County Public Schools)
- Strategies to assist new students in the College (e.g., “creation of a new student kit”).
- Strategies to assist those in need of financial aid (e.g., targeting students with specific scholarship opportunities)
- Strategies to assist students during their first weeks of class (e.g., NOVA Connect registration activities)
- Strategies to assist students experiencing academic difficulty (e.g., instituting a college-wide early probation/suspension program to be administered at the campus level).
- Strategies to help students understand the payment process (e.g., promotion of the FACTS deferred payment program).

Campus-specific*

- Development of a campus tour
- Provide transfer workshop with one-on-one opportunities to work with counselors and/or faculty advisors.
- Identification and invitations extended to students to serve as peer tutors.
- Updating the distance learning website to notify students of their payment options.

With a primary focus on student success, the SSP responds to the needs of the students and the organizational goal of improved retention. The SSP creates a learning environment that fosters success by meeting the needs of a diverse student body. By meeting the needs of the students, NOVA is able to retain the student therefore improving retention. It also provides a framework for subsequent retention strategies as continued research and data show the need for change.

The SSP fits with retention theory and best practices. The SSP makes student success systemic, increases interaction, creates a sense of academic and social connectivity, and brings a focus to retention at both the student and college level.

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OIR Research Report No. 04-06: Promoting Student Success at NOVA: Three-Part Plan
* Additional campus-wide and campus-specific strategies can be found in OIR Report No. 04-06: Promoting student success at NOVA: Three-Part Plan
Works Cited


Mission

The mission of Northern Virginia Community College is to respond to the educational needs of its dynamic and diverse constituencies through an array of comprehensive programs and services that facilitate learning and workforce development in an environment of open access and lifelong educational opportunities.

Strategic Goals

I. STUDENT SUCCESS - Northern Virginia Community College will move into the top tier of community colleges with respect to the retention, graduation, transfer, and career placement of its students.

II. ACCESS – Northern Virginia Community College will increase the number and diversity of students being served to mirror the population growth of the region.

III. TEACHING AND LEARNING – Northern Virginia Community College will focus on student success by creating an environment of world-class teaching and learning.

IV. EXCELLENCE — Northern Virginia Community College will develop ten focal points of excellence in its educational programs and services that will be benchmarked to being the best in the nation and strategic to building the college’s overall reputation for quality.

V. LEADERSHIP – Northern Virginia Community College will serve as a catalyst and a leader in developing educational and economic opportunities for all Northern Virginians and in maintaining the quality of life and economic competitiveness of the region.

VI. PARTNERSHIPS – Northern Virginia Community College will develop strategic partnerships to create gateways of opportunity and an integrated educational system for Northern Virginians who are pursuing the American Dream.

VII. RESOURCES – Northern Virginia Community College will increase its annual funding by $100 million and expand its physical facilities by one million square feet in new construction. This includes the establishment of two additional campuses in Western Fairfax and Loudoun Counties, as well as additional education and training facilities in or near established population centers.