

## **Higher Education: Factors and Strategies for Student Retention**

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### **Abstract**

Education emerged out of the necessity different countries had for better-prepared workers. Well-educated citizens are responsible for taking the best measures for society's social, financial, and political development (Claudio, 2002). Nevertheless, higher education institutions confront the problem of retaining students and helping them finish their academic degrees. This led me to research the role educational institutions have in retaining students and what should professors do at Bronx Community College (BCC) and other institutions.

Objectives:

1. Present academic offering factors related to the pedagogic process and social demands which can affect the retention of students in universities and Bronx Community College.
2. Present strategies that can help with social demands and academic offering factors which influence the retention of students in universities and Bronx Community College.

3. Promote strategies recommended by some retention models (Tinto, 1975, 1987; Bean and Metzner, 1986; Pascarella, 1991) and research showing the effectiveness of those strategies in retaining university students.

All the suggested strategies in this article can be used as reference so higher education institutions can fulfil their commitment to the teaching process and to society and students do not abandon their studies. These practices can be applied at colleges, universities, or they may be substituted according to the educational policies of different countries. However, while higher education institutions have worked hard to retain more students through different strategies, there are always students who do not finish their studies.

## **Introduction**

Education emerged out of the necessity different countries had for better-prepared workers. This was how education became a right each individual has now when belonging to a social group: be it family, community, a city, state, or country (Vázquez, 2009). This right is part of the constitutions of all countries and is ensured by different education laws. These laws have been amended or substituted by other laws because of the changes education has faced and the number of new professions that have emerged in society, which did not exist before. Education then becomes the pillar society uses as a mechanism for its individual and collective development. To that effect, all educational institutions, be it a school, college, or university, should offer the best services their states' or countries' resources allow them to through a process of integrated learning. It means that, during the teaching and learning process, teachers must encourage both

learning of knowledge and applying this knowledge in real situations, and also training students to be solidary, respect diversity, have tolerance, manage emotions, and have the capacity for dialogue and social participation. At Bronx Community College, the responsibility is to enhance the learning experiences for all students by supporting the faculty and staff that create and deliver those learning environments (Bronx Community College & et.al, 2019).

This connection encourages the students to be motivated and complete their studies with the necessary skills to enter the professional world, thus contributing to their own quality of life and the economies of their countries. Furthermore, students should value the right to education as a tool which will facilitate being in a better financial position and collaborating with society as a way to pay back to their countries the investment made in their studies. If students do not connect their classes with their academic goals and do not value the right to education, they can drop out of school, and some will end in extreme poverty and living off of welfare. Hence the importance of retention practices. Retention of students is one of the goals of each educational institution, including universities. In this case, retention is associated with the academic institution's ability to keep students in school, which guarantees students will finish their studies at the scheduled time with mastery of the corresponding skills and knowledge. The Bronx Community College (BCC) commits to student success and retention, beginning with the Admissions Office (Bronx Community College & et. al, 2019), and also offers financial aid, technical support, and student life support, among other services. Professors are key for student retention because they are the advisers, guides, and models who offer students the necessary tools so they can complete their studies successfully.

### **Objectives:**

1. Present specific factors of the academic offer related to the pedagogical process and social demands which could affect the retention of students in universities and the Bronx Community College.
2. Present strategies which could help social demands and factors of the academic offer which have an influence on the retention of students in universities and the Bronx Community College.
3. Promote strategies recommended by some student retention models (Tinto, 1975, 1987; Bean and Metzner, 1986; Pascarella, 1991) and research showing those models have been effective in the retention of college students.

### **Background**

Bronx Community College (BCC) was established in 1957 to meet the growing need for increased higher education opportunities in the Bronx, NY. BCC is part of the City University of New York (CUNY), the largest urban public university in the country, comprised of 25 institutions, including seven community colleges. Bronx County, one of the five boroughs of NYC, has a population of 1.47 M, which is a largely minority population (56% Hispanic and 29.5% Black); with a substantial immigrant population (35% foreign born); in need of further education (only 19% with a bachelor degree or higher); and a poverty rate of 28%, one of the highest in the country. BCC has 41 academic programs (34 associate and 7 certificates) registered with the New York State Department of Education that are active. The vast majority of BCC students (98%) are ethnic minorities, representing more than 100 countries of origin. Approximately one-half

(51%) of BCC students are employed, and almost one-quarter (25%) are supporting children. Approximately one-half (55%) are first-generation college students, and 53% have an annual household income less than \$20,000. Two-thirds (64%) of entering BCC freshmen require developmental instruction in one or more basic skill area (such as) reading, writing, mathematics (Bronx Community College, et.al., 2019).

### **Social demand factors affecting retention**

Social demand factors are situations faced by students which are not related to the education system. If students do not receive help, these factors can affect the retention of students in higher education institutions. According to studies consulted at BCC and other institutions, the most prominent factors are socioeconomic conditions of the families, not providing information required during the financial aid process, pregnancy in women, lack of family support, low expectations about education and work, health problems, or emotional problems. Furthermore, a majority of colleges and universities with student retention programs devote a significant proportion of services towards first year students in hopes of increasing graduation rates. These programs are designed to anticipate and meet the needs of students while transitioning and adjusting to collegiate life and academics (Hanover Research, 2010). General categories of issues affecting student attrition rates include:

- Life issues: Insecurity about financial circumstances, job and school time conflicts, home and family difficulties, personal problems, health problems, college not necessary to meet career goals (Hanover Research, 2010).

Research shows some examples of the reasons why students abandon their higher education:

- Financial problems - according to *Times Higher Education*, 1 out of 4 college students in Germany broke off their studies early due to either financial problems, poor student professor relationships, or lack of motivation (Sagenmüller, 2020).
- Family issues - For a lot of students, family can be a huge stressor and burden, especially when there is a family emergency and the student has to take time off from college (Staff Writer, 2015).
- Conflicting family and work commitments - “Many students who drop out of college have to work while enrolled in college. They often find it very difficult to support themselves and their families and go to college at the same time. Many have dependent children and enroll part-time. Many lack adequate support from parents and student aid.” While this is also a financial issue, this work-study balance has many other underlying problems. About 3 out of 4 respondents said work contributed to their decision to drop out, and 1 out of 3 said balancing work and school was “too stressful.” (Sagenmüller, 2020).

#### **Facts affecting retention in Bronx Community College**

- Almost one-half (45%) of incoming first-time, full-time (FTFT) students drop out of BCC after their first year
- Only one in five (20%) incoming FTFT students earn a BCC degree within 3 years
- Another one in five (20%) incoming FTFT students earn no credits in the first year after they enroll (and half of these students leave college with an average financial liability of \$2,000).

- Students who participate in special programs (ASAP, CD, FYS, ECC) demonstrate higher retention and graduation rates:
  - **Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)** - fast track program to earn a degree.
  - **College Discovery (CD)** – provides services to selected students who show potential for success and would benefit from additional academic and financial assistance.
  - **First Year Program (FYS)** - provides innovative learning opportunities and coordinates support for first year students.
  - **Early Childhood Center (ECC)** - a nationally accredited state-of-the-art and full-service facility serving children of students from 2 to 5 years of age.
- There are substantial differences between the retained and not retained students at BCC. Retained students earn more credits, have higher GPA, pass credit math courses, and owe less money to the college.
- An examination of the course-level performance data for FTFT students suggests that low pass rates of withdrawals contribute to the lack of student progress and persistence during the first semester (Office of Institutional Research, October 2019).

### **Facts affecting retention in other institutions**

According to Kim P. (2019), a study conducted by Public Agenda, the number one reason for leaving college is money. It is not about high tuition bills, though. Many students work while going to school. But the ones who leave find it too difficult to balance both responsibilities. In fact, only 31% of those citing money as their reason for

dropping out did so because of high tuition rates. About 54% said they dropped out because they couldn't balance work and school. Taking remedial college courses only prolongs graduation. In other words, it increases tuition bills. Less than 24% of students required to take remedial college courses complete their program and earn a degree. Being away from home and overwhelmed with classes and responsibilities can cause a student to drop out. The grief of missing home can get in the way of a student's studies. As grades drop, students face consequences similar to those above. Harvard has the highest graduation rate, a soaring 98% (Harvard College, 2020). This is likely due to their very selective process when accepting new students.

### **Academic offering factors affecting traditional and online retention**

Academic offering factors are linked to academic structure and achievement. Studies related to this field of research show which students are more likely to abandon their university studies for the following reasons:

- Poor secondary school preparation - *Times Higher Education* points out, for instance, students in Spain who enter university coming from a vocational training “can have problems getting to groups with the theoretical side of their degree. Others are disoriented by the change from the structured school environment to the more autonomous university world” (Sagenmüller, 2020).
- College atmosphere wasn't the right fit - Some people just do not fit well into the traditional college atmosphere. Some students find an online program fits better with their lifestyle or they consider taking classes as part-time students (Staff Writer, 2015).



- Lack of quality time with professors and counselors - many education experts agree the experience of the student is better if teachers and academic authorities have a personalized approach. Leading education scholar Sir Ken Robinson is very critical of this lack of awareness. Pedro A. Willging and Scott D. Johnson, from the Department of Human Resource Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, studied the dropout rates regarding online education, and explain the specific reasons for dropping included dissatisfaction and the feel of a "de-personalized learning environment" (Staff Writer, 2015).

### **Retention Models: Effective Strategies**

Before entering fully into the strategies higher education institutions may use to encourage student retention, it is necessary to mention these three U.S. models and their recommendations:

- Tinto's Model for student retention – this model consists of two priority phases that interact with each other: academic integration and social integration. This comprehensive model for retention proposes academic integration should be aimed at meeting the goals committed to the curriculum, which should consider the process of teaching and learning, student support services, and the facilities where students will take classes, among other things. Similarly, it is necessary to have a profile of the students' previous grades and their personal attributes. Regarding social integration, the model promotes institutional commitment by providing personal and family counseling for physical health, emotional health, or personal situations. This requires having a complete picture of the student's health

and family characteristics, such as parents' education and their availability to support the student, among others. This model reflects that, if the institution does not promote this social and academic integration, retention is not stable and students may drop out.

- Bean and Metzner Model (1985) – This model bases retention on two variables: academic and environmental.
- Pascarella model (1991) – This model combines academic offering with preceding academic and social conditions new students may have. The purpose is the institutional environment may be attractive as diverse curricular offerings may help students interact with one another.

As can be shown above, all three models agree all college institutions should have a social and academic picture of each admitted student before the student starts a program, in order to help them in their needs.

Various studies show working with social factors does not affect the retention of students so much and point out educational and academic offering factors cause the students to leave. Johnson & Willging (2009) presented a study on two theories, providing a comprehensive theoretical framework that might explain why students leave a course.

- One of these theories is Tinto's Student Integration Model, in which persistence is hypothesized to be related to how well the individual's motivation and academic ability match the institution's academic and social characteristics. This match shapes a person's commitment to completing college and commitment to the institution.

- The second theory, Bean's Model of Student Departure, predicts persistence based on behavioral intention. These behavioral intentions are shaped by beliefs and attitudes. Student's experiences within the institution—but also factors external to the institution—can affect beliefs, attitudes, and decisions.

Noting some gaps in Tinto's theory, a convergence model has been suggested that combines the major propositions embedded in these two theories.

Whereas, the largest study of persistence and dropout rates undertaken in the UK involved more than 500 college staff, 8,500 students, and 33 colleges. This study confirms students are more likely to drop out if they: Do not feel they have been placed in the most appropriate course, applied to college late, find it difficult to make friends, find it difficult to settle in at the beginning of their course, are less satisfied than current students with the quality of teaching, are less satisfied than current students with their course timetable, are less satisfied than current students with help either to get a job or to go to university, are male, have difficult financial circumstances (older students) or family circumstances (younger students) and have their fees waived or reduced (Johnson & Willging, 2009).

By contrast, a recent review of dropouts in web-based distance education concluded communication or social interaction among students and between teacher and students represents a major factor in the decision to withdraw from a web-based course, as well as technology issues (Johnson & Willging, 2009).

Furthermore, according to Campbell and Nutt (2008), similarities between the role of an academic advisor and a professor should not go unnoticed, because both are closely connected to curriculum development, learning experiences, and learning expectations.

These include establishing high expectations, providing support, offering feedback, and facilitating participation during the learning process through regular contact with students and teaching staff (Tinto, 2004). This description by the professionals implies the profile academic advisors obtain about the student must be shared with professors who will impact such students, especially about the ways of learning new students were used to.

For example, students may inform that previous teachers used learning strategies based on differentiated teaching, through teamwork, in which each team nominated a leader who was in charge of bringing information to the group, and each group was evaluated using a rubric previously discussed with the team. The academic advisor must know the learning strategies and means of evaluation used by professors. This input will help the academic advisor in offering guidance based on the reality students will face, and this will facilitate the transition. It is also important academic deans foster meetings with this staff with the purpose that advisors share information about the services provided to students and gather relevant information from the teachers.

### **Strategies for helping social demands**

Almost all universities are aware of barriers such as the families' socioeconomic factors, as well as health or emotional problems, and they have established the following strategies:

- Offering scholarships – Some scholarships cover tuition, cost of books, dorms, and offer cash for transportation for students who do not stay in dorms. According to the College Board, in the 2014-2015 academic year, postsecondary students received a total of \$123.8 billion in scholarships and grants, of which 14% came from private groups. By being strategic about how

to search and apply for scholarships, students can get significant help paying for higher education (Safier, 2018).

- Providing opportunities for students to take out loans when scholarships are not enough – Universities handle these loans through government and private banks, and students must start paying them a year after they finish their studies, giving them an opportunity to start working. In the United States and its territories, students are given the opportunity of not paying back the loans if the student commits to working five years in that state or territory. Federal student loans offer deferment and forbearance options for temporarily suspending payments, repayment plans that reduce monthly payments by increasing the term of the loan (and the total interest paid), and loan forgiveness and loan repayment assistance programs for students who pursue careers in specific occupations (Edvisors Network, Inc., 1998-2019).
- Offering a healthcare plan to students – Trent University defined four main strategies for improving retention rates at the institution: improve support to students and enhance student life programs. The university planned improvements in health, career center, housing, special needs, and athletic and recreational services for students (Hanover Research, 2014).
- Hiring physicians and psychologists who provide students with health services and support to manage their emotions – The extremely high prevalence of mental health problems in university students provides evidence for this being a population at risk. The results highlight the need for universal early

interventions to prevent the development of severe mental illness in university students (Stallman, 2011).

The following strategies are recommended for difficulties related to managing freedom when living at dorms, managing work, or lack of knowledge of educational goals:

- Provide orientation to all students living at dorms, including external stimulus which could potentially affect their educational goals when they are alone and without family support, and help them focus in their studies using a daily schedule to set time aside for studies, preparing food, socialize, and rest, etc. Academic advising is considered “perhaps the most crucial aspect” of a student’s interaction and engagement with university staff and can play a major role in retention. According to a 2009 survey by The College Board, about 83 percent of the U.S. institutions surveyed require first-year students to meet with advisers at least once each semester. Vincent Tinto, who has published extensively on student retention in the United States, suggests that social support for students through advising or mentoring can enhance retention and completion. This is especially true for at-risk student populations like first-generation and low-income students who may lack other resources for dealing with the challenges of completing a post-secondary degree program (Hanover Research, 2014).
- Find the cause some students work and present alternatives. If the students do not accept these alternatives, help them prepare the study plan they need to follow to meet their academic goals. Learning experiences are “the collective

effort of faculty, staff, and students.” Tinto suggests the classroom is the primary place for students to engage with their peers and faculty. This is particularly applicable for non-residential students and students working part-time or full-time while earning their degree, who may not engage in other campus activities, events, or organizations (Hanover Research, 2014).

- Coordinate with professional advisors the administration of a vocational interests test, and an opportunity to discuss the results. A recent study by Loan and Voan showed the purpose of career guidance was assisting students in the reflection of their ambitions, interests, qualifications, and abilities (Suryadi, Ratna, Hamidah & Hanifa, 2018).

### **BCC strategies and Retention Action Plan**

The 2019-2020 Retention Action Plan has been developed to positively impact the retention of students enrolled in the Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 semesters by:

- Restructuring and formalizing coaching efforts (advisement, mentoring, and tutoring) to support, track, and improve student engagement and success-oriented behaviors.
- Engaging campus community in the Mindset Implementation/Assessment Plan initiative to create and communicate a culture that articulates high academic standards, believes students can meet those high standards, provides constructive formative assessment feedback to students, and develops student receptivity to that feedback.
- Maximizing the impact of electronic devices and other tools to engage faculty and student support staff with the purpose of providing regular,

actionable, and trackable feedback for students and their advisors, as well as tracking advisement and tutoring appointments.

- Developing, implementing, and accelerating structures designed to support curricular Academic Master Plan (AMP) and programmatic Research in Science & Engineering Program (RISE) improvements.
- Encouraging and supporting innovations from individuals and departments related to retention efforts. These innovations can be pedagogical, curricular, and programmatic improvements; as well as academic, personal and professional support, and professional development.

### **Strategies related to academic offering factors which influence retention**

The students who are most vulnerable to abandon their college studies are:

- Those who do not adapt to the way the professors teach
- Those who lower their grades
- Those who do not feel a connection with the teachers or with their classmates
- Those who do not participate in extracurricular activities
- Those who do not feel safe within the college environment (universities with limited economic resources and academic offerings.)
- Other causes

These factors are also aligned with physical facilities, equipment and supplies, curricular offerings, and teaching practices of professors.

From these factors, university presidents, curriculum specialists, deans, and administrators may generate the following strategies:



- Evaluate physical facilities: These are a substantive value of teaching thus they must be evaluated to see if they meet the necessary standards to preserve the health and safety of the personnel and the students. In the same manner, classrooms must be evaluated regarding the real amount of space and to see if they comply with requirements to install the necessary equipment. According to Kandiko & Mawer (2013), facilities and resources are central. If the institution is unable to effectively provide the environment in which the student can learn, it appears to be seen as failing in its mandate. Students increasingly reflect negatively on failures to meet their expectations.
- Consciously evaluate equipment and supplies utilized to conduct the process of teaching and learning. This assessment must consider if equipment and supplies are relevant to the concepts, skills, or competencies that will be taught, if existing technology is up to date and is enough based on the number of students enrolled. This also includes computer laboratories for students with flexible hours, technical support, and email accounts for students so they can do their assignments, among other things. With the benefits provided by the use of technology, faculty members must make every effort to integrate this technology into the classroom. This requires the use of computer technology, such as spreadsheets, databases, and graphics presentation software packages. An up-to-date reliable and adequately maintained computer laboratory for the student community is a necessity in today's technology-focused society (Lau, 2003).

- Evaluate the curricular offerings to know if they meet the students' needs and expectations, if they are relevant to a globalized and regionalist world, if they are wide enough, and if they offer the courses necessary for present times such as:
  - Educational technology with up-to-date technical equipment
  - Fine arts
  - Physical education
  - Courses that encourage a connection between education and society, such as learning in service.

For any university to truly be competitive within the digital global economic environment, its curriculum must provide opportunities for the students, in particular, and faculty, as well, (lecturers) to obtain a global perspective and become global citizens. The university's curriculum must be able to drastically engineer internationalization. The curriculum of the university should be such that every student and others in the university community major in just one thing, positively changing the world (Kpolovie & Lale, 2017).

- Evaluate the effectiveness of professors during the teaching and learning process regarding the varied usage of methodologies and teaching practices; the impact of their educational efforts on the students; their academic development; and their relationships with the students, university personnel, and the community, as well as the methods used to evaluate students. According to Taylor (2018), measuring the academic performance of students allows educators to determine the effectiveness of their teaching methods, students'

level of knowledge, and satisfaction with the education process. Similarly, formative feedback is a significant tool, since it provides students with an opportunity to interact with teachers and ask for assistance when they have difficulty understanding a concept (Thomas, Crosling and Heagney, 2009, in Taylor, J, 2018).

From this perspective, the role of the professor changes to that of an educational leader, a maker of leaders. Professors are the key to student retention, so they must:

- Interact with students in a way so that both share knowledge.
- Encourage students to grow in the profession in which they are developing, using both their potential and interaction—through collaborative work—with students from different backgrounds and experiences, which favors better social relationships.
- Develop a challenging teaching and learning process so students feel motivated to go to the classroom.
- Promote effective communication where the voice of the student is taken into account. In education, the voice of the student refers to the values, opinions, beliefs, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds of individual students and groups of students in a school, and to instructional approaches and techniques that are based on student choices, interests, passions, and ambitions (Journalists et. al., 2013). In this way, academical and/or social factors can be identified.
- Promote students to share their knowledge, including technological knowledge, with all who are involved (professors and other students.)

- Promote teamwork in which each team leader has the freedom to use different practices, so the members of the team and other students acquire new learning.
- Celebrate the achievement of students.

## **Closing**

All strategies suggested represent a picture which can be used as a reference when complying with the commitment of higher education institutions to the process of learning and with society, with the aim that students do not give up on learning. These practices may be applied by different colleges, universities, or be substituted according to the educational policies of different countries. With its retention strategies, Bronx Community College offers an example of how to help students and faculty with the factors of academic offering. Meanwhile, this does not mean social factors are not important, but they will depend on the particular needs BCC or any other institution has during that current year.

And yet, in spite of the hard work of higher education institutions to retain students through different strategies, some students do not complete their studies. In the fall of 2018, nearly 18.5 million students were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. Despite upticks in the six-year graduation rate, barring a major spike in that rate, millions of those students will leave school without earning a degree if current trends continue. The reasons those students drop out vary, experts say. “What we’ve determined is that, overwhelmingly, the primary reason is financial,” says Mary Schmidt Campbell, President of Spelman College in Georgia. Other factors are academic struggles and personal issues—such as

family or work obligations. Also, “students have complicated lives,” says Timothy M. Renick, Senior Vice President for student success at Georgia State University. To keep students in school, Spelman offers emergency grants for students who have small balances that might keep them from being able to return to campus, and first-generation mentoring, among other initiatives (Moody, 2019).

For example, in the United States, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2015) informed that 36% of the students enrolled in bachelor’s degrees in higher education institutions did not complete their studies in four years, and 20% did not complete the degree. The fact those students did not finish does not mean they dropped out of school. Several factors may come up, such as:

- Students who enrolled in four or five courses required per year
- Students who preferred to work during the day and study at night
- Students who needed to move and transferred to another college
- Other causes

The overall college enrollment rate for young adults increased from 35 percent in 2000 to 40 percent in 2017. In 2017, the college enrollment rate was higher for Asian young adults (65 percent) than for White (41 percent), Black (36 percent), and Hispanic (36 percent) young adults. Between 2000 and 2017, total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 27 percent (from 13.2 million to 16.8 million students). By 2028, total undergraduate enrollment is projected to increase to 17.2 million students (U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019).

Qualitative studies were used to expose factors of academic offering and social demands which can influence student retention. These studies were conducted with students who dropped out of college and then returned to complete their degree. From this data, it follows that higher education institutions should follow up with students who unenroll or abandon their studies in order to know their reasons for doing so.

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