Technology for Student Retention and Success

College Student Retention is a major priority for many institutions in the United States, including Puerto Rico. Some of these institutions are way aware of the magnitude of the problem in their respective context, but others are still dealing with ways of understanding the reality of retention among their students.

In days where technology has become an integral part of every institution and organization in our society, student success should be easier to manage from a data point of view. Even when factors influencing dropout behavior are still under study, having information available makes it easier to analyze students' situation within each institution. However, for some college institutions, this is still

a problem. While technology investments have taken place continuously, lack of useful and strategically integrated data limits the potential of using information systems as a tool to improve student retention.
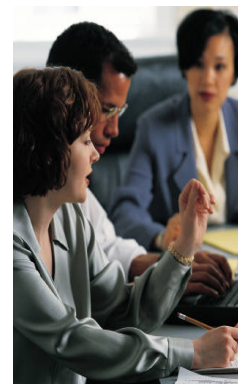
The Hispanic Educational Technology Services Consortium (HETS), aimed at supporting its member institutions' strategies for student success through technology, launched a series of roundtable sessions on Student Retention and Success in order to better understand the phenomenon in its institutions and explore ways of better serving these purposes. The "Synergies for Student Success" series took place in both Puerto Rico and New York during 2007.

This special report highlights the results of these two events, especially focusing on strategies that have been implemented along different institutions in order to promote student success and increase retention rates. It also centers on existing challenges to an effective use of technology for these purposes and institutional needs.

Participating Institutions

The information gathered in this report responds to the needs and strategies identified through roundtable discussions among faculty, information technology administrators, student support staff, and financial aid personnel from the following institutions:

Inter American University of Puerto Rico
Ana G. Mendez University System
University of the Sacred Heart
Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico
Pontifical Catholic University of Puerto Rico
Humacao Community College
Carlos Albizu University, San Juan Campus

University of Puerto Rico
Queensborough Community College
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
Borough of Manhattan Community College
Medgar Evers College
Hostos Community College

Planning for Retention and Student Success

Planning is a key part of every process in an effective organization; colleges and universities are not the exception. It is of particular importance when dealing with retention and student success, especially since it gives particular attention to needs before any planning actually occurs. Students' needs must be met in order for the institution to retain them and for themselves to be successful during and after college.

Institutions such as the Bronx Community College, for instance, has seen the results of planning for retention and student success. Ten years of planning has opened many opportunities through different funded projects. This has also been the case for other institutions under the City University of New York (CUNY) system.

Nonetheless, planning for retention and student success does not necessarily occur in every organization as expected. In fact, some institutions have not even recognized having a retention problem. This is especially true when they lack a systematized mechanism to track their students' progress. There are, then, some of member institutions that have started to develop retention goals at campus or unit levels, but still lack a methodology to assess retention levels and track a student's progress, which makes these goals somewhat unrealistic and immeasurable.

On the other hand, according to member institutions' discussions on this matter, some do have plans oriented towards retention and student success that are particularly designed by their central administrations. These plans provide institutions under the system a set of indicators intended to guide their work. It is their job, then, to design specific strategies and programs to reach these indicators. The amount of work that needs to be done in order to reach these indicators, nonetheless, is usually intense. No standard procedures are given specifically for these purposes.

Focus on what "student success" means to your institution and to your student population; plan, then, for the accomplishment of that success scenario.
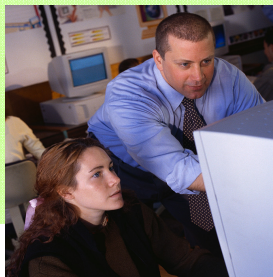
Retention and Student Success Strategies

Some of the strategies mentioned to have been successful in helping institutions increase student satisfaction, retention rates, and the potential for student success include a variety of methods, most of them conducted face to face.

◊ Collaborative committees that analyze data and propose recommendations
◊ Administrative structures supportive of the idea behind student success
◊ Proactive attitude in identifying student challenges and obstacles
◊ Compulsory advisement
◊ Integrated education
◊ Increasing participation among faculty members
◊ Learning centers
◊ Technology enhanced libraries
◊ Integrate student services with academic program
◊ Face to face academic advisement

◊ Honors programs
◊ Personalized attention
◊ Centralized advisement services
◊ Extended hours and weekend offerings
◊ Student satisfaction surveys and needs assessments
◊ Faculty and staff development opportunities
◊ One-stop shop advising services
◊ Freshman orientation programs
◊ Sophomore orientation
◊ Referral systems
◊ Practical workshops
◊ Compulsory introductory course
◊ Multi-cultural support services
◊ Mentoring programs
◊ Enrollment Management Programs
◊ Retention task forces

Lesson Learned: Focus on Students' Needs

Student satisfaction surveys, needs assessments, and focus groups tell institutions a lot about the needs and challenges of their students. This should be the first step before starting to work on any student success plan. After this, it is important to establish a data management system strategic and dynamic enough to be a tool for planning and proactive action. Data collected should serve precisely the purposes of each unit or department and also tell the institution where and when to catch up with the student before it's too late.

Uses and Impact of Technology for Retention and Student Success
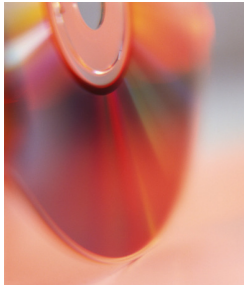
Participating institutions indicated having established data management systems to gather information about their students. Some, however, have already gone beyond the collection of demographics and grades to the point of actually tracking enrollment and class attendance. These institutions have started to move towards an e-attendance system that is expected to alert the student and move faculty and student support staff to explore students' potential problems. Others have started to implement automated retention tracking systems that even assess the reasons for student to drop off classes .

In order to use technology effectively for teaching, learning, and support purposes, some member institutions gather interdepartmental teams to regularly discuss technology issues in the campus. Really important to highlight from this initiative is the inclusion of faculty to tackle the issues that impact students through the use of technology. At the same time,

this helps promote the use of technology among faculty and minimize existing reluctance. In some other institutions, online collaboration spaces have been made available to promote cooperation among departments in dealing with retention issues. This supports a continuous monitoring, referral, and attention process highly capable of preventing failures and losses.

The focus in other institutions has been on actual student support through technology. Colleges and universities following this direction have created and adopted technology as a way of getting the service to the student in a more efficient way. The most frequent e-strategies include e-mentoring, e-tutoring, e-portfolio, and online advising. These are supported by faculty training in the use of technology for as a support to their teaching-learning approach. For many of them, this was possible through project specific grants, including Title-V grants.

Challenges to an Effective Use of Technology for Student Retention and Success

Every participating member institution, from the most advanced to those that are still learning along the way, have experienced diverse challenges in implementing the latest technologies for student retention and success. Most of them seem to have a common issue when dealing with promoting the use of technologies among faculty. Others, on the other hand, have had trouble getting students to actively participate in this process.

However, some institutions, after investing

large amounts in different technology and data management systems, face the challenge of learning how to effectively use and integrate the technology or data for their own institutional purposes. According to one of the participants, "the lack of a comprehensive structure to gather relevant data regarding students' performance and implement it into other effective retention programs delays a rapid and effective implementation".

Additional challenges faced by these institutions include:

◊ Limited space and computer classrooms
◊ Learning how to get the right data
◊ Use of course management systems on campus
◊ Training technology and data users
◊ Overly centralized processes
◊ Weak data integration
◊ Variety of student populations among campuses.

Areas of Need and Interest for Member Institutions
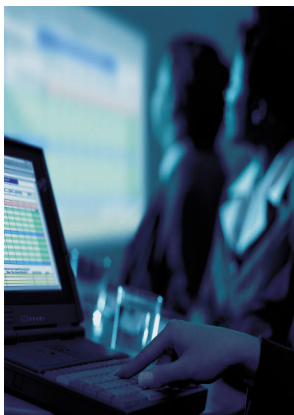
Following, we include a set of areas of need and interest indicated by representatives of our member institutions in the "2007 Synergies for Student Success" series. Should you feel there are areas you would like to collaborate with or in, don't hesitate to contact us anytime.

Tip: Student retention starts in the classroom

◊ Mentoring
◊ Electronic Portfolios
◊ Early Alert & Referral Systems
◊ Career Assessment & Advising
◊ Supplemental Instruction
◊ Technology capabilities
◊ Instructional Technology
◊ Enhancing learning environments
◊ Online support
◊ Technology-supported transitional programs
◊ Student tracking systems
◊ Enhanced technology capabilities

◊ Establishing online student center
◊ Implementation of technology projects
◊ Maximizing the impact of orientation strategies
◊ Assessing impact of implemented strategies
◊ Online counseling
◊ Implementation of online programs
◊ Evaluating faculty on their use of technology

Hispanic Educational Technology Services
2007