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# Creating a Retention Culture

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### ***About the Author***

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## **Creating a Retention Culture**

Student retention efforts are often described in terms of programs and strategies. While such initiatives contribute to the success and persistence of students, alone they possess marginal power to impact retention outcomes. The true power any institution has to affect academic performance and enrollment behavior is the campus culture.

A retention-centered culture focuses holistically on the developmental needs of students—intellectual, social, emotional, and physical. Inherent in the term “developmental” is the concept of a progression or evolution of a student’s capacity to succeed. Students develop capacity incrementally. There is no “quick fix” or single intervention that yields a substantive and lasting change in a human being’s capacity to learn or to persist. It is only through continuous practice of requisite learner behaviors and success strategies that a lasting transformation occurs.

In Matthew Syed's book, *Bounce*, the author asserts that talent is overrated. His research reveals that "purposeful practice" trumps talent. Syed's thesis is that all humans have the capacity for excellence if they are passionate about what they pursue and they practice diligently. Your students are no different. They possess the capacity to succeed at your institution if the conditions for success are in place. The necessary conditions for success are relatively simple to infuse in a college or university culture. Conditions for success include:

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**Create a learning environment that praises individual effort rather than performance.** Too often a focus on grades to the exclusion of effort results in the lowering of academic standards or the discouragement of under performers. Set the bar high and provide students with the support needed to demonstrate continuous improvement without the fear of failure. Renowned educational researcher and author of *Mindset*, Carol Dweck, performed studies with students to determine how different types of praise affected behavior. Half of the students were praised for their intelligence and rewarded with comments such as, "You excel at this!" The other half were praised for their effort: "It is obvious that you invested significant time and effort on this project." Following the praise exercise, students were asked if they would prefer to take an easy or difficult task. Remarkably, Dweck found that two-thirds of the students praised for their intelligence chose the easy task—they did not want to risk losing their "smart" label. Ninety percent of the effort-praised group selected the difficult task—they cared less about success and more about engaging in a challenging exercise.

**Require students to show up.** Few students will succeed if they are not physically and mentally present. Attendance can be captured through the traditional means of taking roll, but this is not practical in larger classes and may be counter to the culture in many institutions. Where taking roll is not feasible or desirable, consider leveraging technology—ID card proximity readers, clicker technology, or learning management systems. Also, consider frequent class assignments such as one minute papers that allow students to demonstrate what they have learned while attending class. Of course, attendance without engagement in learning is like putting on the uniform for the big game and never entering the field of play. There is minimal benefit. The literature is replete with claims of the superiority of active learning pedagogy versus more traditional “sage on the stage” methods of teaching and learning. Scholars such as Carol Twigg, who produced groundbreaking research in the use of technology to transform learning, and John Braxton, who has studied the impact of active learning on student attrition, have all reached the same conclusion. Actively engaged learners persist and succeed.

**Manage classroom behavior.** Malcolm Gladwell’s national bestseller, *The Tipping Point*, illustrates how small things can have a profound impact when a “tipping point” is breached. Classroom behavior is so essential to fostering an environment that is conducive to learning that even seemingly benign acts by students or professors can surpass a “tipping point” where substantive learning begins to atrophy. To protect against this phenomena, establish clear expectations for classroom behavior and hold students accountable. Attending class is a privilege, not a right. Student disruptions

and other inappropriate behaviors dilute the learning environment for everyone.

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**Provide early academic feedback.** Many institutions doggedly pursue faculty for the submission of mid-term grades. This type of academic feedback is delivered far too late in the semester cycle to result in interventions that change the outcome. Students, particularly first-time students, need academic feedback within the first three weeks of class. For students who have unrealistic expectations of the amount of effort required to succeed in a class, this will serve as a “wakeup call.” There will be time for interventions to be effective.

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**Engage students with opportunities to practice.** Whether in class, through homework assignments, in tutoring or Supplemental Instruction sessions, students must practice in order to enhance learning capacity. However, practice alone is not sufficient. While practicing they need constant feedback—offer guidance on correct methods, imbue proven learning strategies, provide examples designed to illustrate proper techniques, and advise students of potential mid-course adjustments when they stray off track.

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**Surround students with mentors.** The human factor is perhaps the only fail-proof approach to student retention. Researchers such as Toni and David Campbell have demonstrated the consistent impact of student mentoring on grade point averages and most significantly, on the reduction of dropout rates. Every one of us remembers those people in our lives who encouraged us, challenged us, and inspired us. These are the mentors who

made a difference in our lives at the critical nexus of personal need and the right message or action. On your campus, mentors are not defined by organization position or job descriptions. Mentors are college and university presidents, faculty, advisors, custodial staff, administrative staff, other students, and alumni—anyone willing to invest time and effort caring about a student. Occasionally, powerful mentoring moments occur with a casual acquaintance, but more often, these moments are birthed through a meaningful relationship grounded in mutual trust. Mentors invest themselves in building trust relationships.

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**Connect students with others in academic and social settings.** Vincent Tinto, the author of multiple books on student departure including perhaps his best known work, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, refers to this phenomenon as academic and social integration. Tinto and numerous others have recognized the profound impact of personal connections in and outside the classroom. Unfortunately, the students, who need these connections most, often fail to seek them out. Institutions with a retention culture proactively look for opportunities to create meaningful connections. Without personal connections, the conditions necessary to engender commitment to an institution and even individual educational goals are fundamentally absent. And without commitment, students are prone to abandon their academic pursuits prematurely.

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**Ignite their passion.** When approached by one of his young protégés with the question: “How can I know all it is that you know,” Socrates escorted

him to a nearby river and proceeded to wade in deeper and deeper. As they reached depths that exceeded the neckline of the would-be scholar, the young man struggled and began to fight to survive. After few moments of gasping for air, Socrates pulled the man to safety. He looked at the still trembling protégé and said, “When you desire to possess the knowledge I have as passionately as you fought to stay alive, you will amass untold knowledge.” The point of this parable is that all of your students have passion within them. You simply need to unearth their passion and ignite it.

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**Foster a sense of belonging.** To many students, particularly new students, first generation postsecondary learners, underrepresented populations, and returning adults, the prospect of attending a college or university can be daunting. Instinctively, they desire to “fit in” and be accepted. Some will feel a sense of belonging almost immediately, and for others, the journey will never be completed. It is incumbent upon an institution to create an educational environment that is welcoming and accepting. Retention-oriented organizations actively pursue opportunities to promote a sense of belonging with every encounter they have with the students they serve—a practice Jan Carlson coined as “managing moments of truth” in his 1987 book, *Moments of Truth*.

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**Deliver on institutional promises—covenants with the students you serve.** Whether conveyed overtly or covertly, every institution makes promises to their students. They arrive in the hollowed hallways of your institution filled with great expectations—some realistic and some not. When incongruence exists between student expectations and the reality they experience,

dissatisfaction and even attrition often occurs. There are two actions required of retention-focused institutions in order to ensure congruence between expectations and reality. First, carefully yet assertively manage unrealistic expectations. Communicate clearly what the institution expects of its students as well as what the student can expect from the institution—including limitations and boundaries for addressing student needs and wants. Be prepared with institutional responses when students perceive the institution has failed to meet their expectations. Specifically, when the institution has violated its covenant with a student, be prepared to remedy the situation. When the student’s expectations are outside the bounds of the covenant, have standardized responses related to what the institution will and will not do. Second, ensure that all realistic student expectations are met or exceeded (e.g., class availability to support reasonable progression toward degree completion, high quality classroom instruction, a safe living and learning environment, and mutual respect to be honored in student encounters with faculty and staff).

By creating these ten conditions for student success, an institution can dramatically improve retention. However, these conditions cannot exist pervasively on a campus without broad-based buy-in. The notion that “retention is everyone’s business” is more myth than fact at most colleges and universities. Commonly espoused rhetoric of the importance of student retention is rarely accompanied by meaningful action supporting these claims. If an institution fails to demonstrate that it genuinely values personal investment in retention efforts,



the roots of such an enterprise will be shallow and thus, lack transformational power. While some will sacrifice time and effort for the altruistic virtue of helping students succeed, there will not be a culture change that undergirds a holistic and integrated approach to retention. You must provide tangible evidence that the lot of each person on campus will be positively impacted by investing in student success.

Claims that retention is necessary to secure the institution's financial health or reputation, while potentially true, will fall on deaf ears. Worse yet, the oft empty claim that "your job depends on student enrollment" actually can yield a counterproductive reaction. To effectively shift the culture to one that is retention-focused, you must answer a seemingly simple yet complex question: "What is in it for me?" You must demonstrate how the institution will reward personal investments of time and effort. For faculty, this translates to meaningful recognition in the promotion and tenure review process, reduction of teaching load for substantial commitments to retention activities, professional development opportunities, and when appropriate financial compensation. As for staff, they are motivated by recognition by their colleagues, supervisors, and institutional leaders. They prefer that such recognition is reflected in performance appraisals and is linked to promotion opportunities and salary increases.

Regrettably, most higher education institutions are unwilling or unable to motivate their employees with these concrete rewards. In point of fact, the opposite is often true. Good advisors are given more advisees; contributing faculty are asked to participate over and over again in related committees and events; productive staff are required to take on additional responsibilities "off the

side of the desk.” Pareto’s 80/20 rule (eighty percent of retention activities are completed by twenty percent of the people) does not produce a culture of student success. It results in burnout and resentment.

Consequently, you are encouraged not to attempt a retention culture journey unless you are willing to invest in your single greatest opportunity to improve student retention—your human and organizational capacity. Regarding the latter, a retention priority must be embedded in everything you do (e.g., hiring practices, job descriptions, performance reviews, annual reports, budget deliberations, and institutional priority setting). You must leverage the data you possess or need to acquire to move past treating attrition symptoms, such as poor academic performance, to focus on causation. Why did a student perform poorly in a class? Why is a student not participating in class? Why is a student not adapting well to the transition to college?

As these questions suggest, improved retention does not result from a “one-size-fits-all” solution. Each student’s individual background, circumstances, motivation, mindset, and aptitude must be taken into account when prescribing a remedy. Understanding and addressing root causes for identifiable symptoms of attrition is the only way to have maximum impact on the desired learner outcome. This means that effective retention is labor intensive. Hundreds, if not thousands, of contact hours are required with students who have deeply ingrained, unproductive learning habits and significant deficits. They did not reach their current state overnight, and you will not reverse these learned patterns with sporadic interventions.

All this is to say, that creating a retention culture with the individual and organizational capacity to produce meaningful results is not for the faint of heart. There are no “quick fixes.” Moreover, you will are unlikely to see the immediate impact of your efforts to improve retention. Creating a retention culture is a protracted campaign. It requires the institutional will to stay the course over the long haul.

As Jim Collin’s suggests in his book, *Good to Great*, the organizations that achieve greatness do so incrementally. They apply what Collins refers to as the “flywheel” effect—everyone within an organization pushing in a common direction with a shared purpose. With an institutional focus on student retention and the will to stay the course, you can create and sustain a retention culture that serves your students and school well.