

## Creating a University-Wide Strategy for Retention

Over the past few months, I have been examining the quantitative data about our students and spending time with campus partners on a listening tour: asking common questions around the challenges that our students face, the factors that impact the persistence of our undergraduate students, and their knowledge about current efforts toward retention and persistence in their department and at the university level.

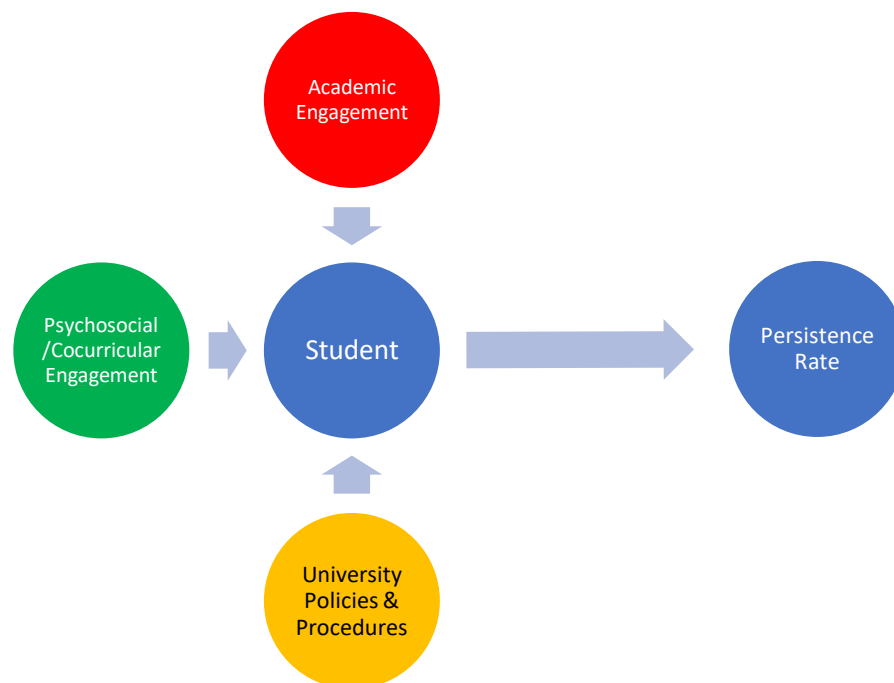
As a result of these conversations and my involvement thus far on a number of different committees and groups, a few broader themes have emerged that need some strategic discussion and reflection as we think about how to move forward:

### The relationship between retention and persistence

Although the concepts of retention and persistence are often used interchangeably, they are separate but closely interrelated issues:

*Retention* focuses on the actions the university takes that directly and indirectly impact our students – these things are wide ranging in scope; on a basic level, they include what occurs both inside and outside of the classroom, involve interaction with faculty, staff, peers and the larger community, and also are tied to the policies, procedures, rules, requirements, and guidelines of the institution.

*Persistence* is a function of the impact of retention efforts on our students. When the university focuses on developing a framework of intentional experiences for students that are designed to meet particular outcomes known to impact persistence, takes steps to maximize learning and academic success in ways that are student-centered, and works toward refining university policies and processes in ways that minimize or eliminate barriers to degree progression while maximizing support, students should experience the university in increasingly positive ways and we would *expect* to see incremental increases in persistence rates over time:



## **We need to be process-oriented in the creation of this retention framework**

In conversation with individuals across campus, there are varying degrees of knowledge and understanding regarding how the university is approaching the issue of improving persistence rates, but one common theme that exists is that the change management process has not always been transparent and inclusive. There is a general belief that at times, institutional decisions have been made with minimal explanation of “the why” behind them and have not been placed in the broader context of how these decisions will benefit the institution, nor have they been communicated clearly from the “top down”; faculty and staff have sometimes felt as though the university jumps from one idea to another to find the right solution and that there isn’t a plan or roadmap we are following to guide us as an institution.

While it is important to directly address the persistence of particular groups of students whom we have identified as having lower persistence rates from the first to the second year, we also need to create a broader framework for how the university will approach retention and ensure that this is a systematic process that involves key stakeholders in a manner that is inclusive, collaborative, and solutions focused. By creating this framework together as a university, we can capitalize on the knowledge, experience, and understanding of our faculty, staff, and students, enhance their ability to see their role in the success of the university, and maximize the collective support for (and implementation of) the decisions that are made.

## **A framework for university-wide retention should be holistic and developmental in focus**

As we create a larger model of retention initiatives that are tied to particular goals and outcomes for our students, it is important for us to maintain a lens that is both holistic and developmental in nature. We need to recognize that the factors that are tied to student success are multifaceted and highly interrelated, and that the intellectual, emotional, social, ethical, physical, and spiritual all have a significant impact on the experience of our students and that student success in college isn’t just academic in nature.

It is also important to understand the ways in which our students change over time in these critical aspects of their development, and to create a retention model that proactively supports students as they work through critical tasks that are a part of the college experience. The outcomes we establish for our first-year students (around transition, engagement, and belonging) should be quite different from those that are the focus of the second year (around consolidating a sense of purpose); in turn, the expectations we have of our third-year students (addressing skill development to accomplish personal goals) will be qualitatively different than those of our seniors (preparation for the transition into the workforce or professional study).

## **The process of developing a university-wide retention framework can be done through the *Retention Steering Committee*:**

This committee has done great work over the past few years. With a few subtle changes to its organizational structure and charge, this Committee can lead efforts to develop a university-wide retention model:

- There should be individuals serving on the RSC from each academic college, from critical areas of Student Affairs, and from the offices/services that implement the business practices of the institution.
- The committee should determine the larger questions that need to be answered around retention and persistence, to provide a comprehensive understanding of what we know about our students and where we stand with current retention efforts. In turn, this knowledge will guide the creation of a set of action steps to gather the additional information we need to inform knowledge-based decision making.

- The committee will use this information to develop a set of recommendations for a university-wide retention model that addresses academic/intellectual engagement, psychosocial/cocurricular engagement, and refined institutional business practices with a primary goal that students experience the institution in increasingly positive ways that improve persistence and graduation rates.

This is an *ongoing process* that will provide critical pieces of the retention model over time, while systematically examining their effectiveness and using this data to refine programs, services, and processes through a mindset of continuous improvement (see below).

### **Creating a larger framework for retention can guide our understanding of the needs of specific populations**

Although these efforts can and should be done simultaneously, it is critical for the institution to develop a university-wide framework for retention that is experienced by all of our students. Conversations with faculty, staff, students and administrators have made it clear that there are significant gaps in the core experiences of our students prior to and during their first year, and at key points in the second, third, and fourth years. Developing a university-wide retention plan that identifies and addresses these gaps will allow us to examine its effectiveness on particular sub-populations with lower persistence and graduation rates:

- Underrepresented minority students
- First-Generation students
- Commuter students

We can then zero in on what needs to be added (or changed) in the experience of these students through applying the [principles of Continuous Improvement](#), rather than creating separate retention programs for each population, which tend to get “owned” by different departments that can struggle to put these programs into practice on their own.

### **Proceed with caution when setting goals for persistence rates**

It has been my experience that setting unique persistence goals for different sub-populations of students (or for each degree-granting college) can be problematic if they are not placed in proper context. Instead of creating a mindset that we are working collectively toward addressing a university-wide issue, this model can foster feelings of *competitiveness* between the degree-granting colleges as they focus on retaining and graduating students in their programs of study at the expense of what is best for the student, and lead to *isolation* rather than collaboration, as departments do whatever they can to keep “their students”, while not communicating with their colleagues about retention efforts that appear to be having a positive impact that could be implemented across all degree-granting colleges.

In the absence of a larger framework for university-wide retention efforts that they had a role in creating, it is easy for individual departments to lose sight of the bigger picture of what we are trying to accomplish; this could result in a significant duplication of effort, along with the belief that departments do not have the resources they need to implement their ideas. In addition, creating unique retention goals for different sub-populations of students can lead to a mindset that the retention of \_\_\_\_ students is “someone else’s responsibility” when it is not.

## **The university needs to properly assess the experiences of our students and share the data with stakeholders**

As an institution, we need to gain a deeper understanding of who our students are as they enter the university and complete their first year: their ideas about college, their expectations for engagement with the institution, their self-understanding, and their primary concerns as they begin college. We also need to know more about how they experience the university at different points in their academic careers and why they are leaving the institution. By developing a framework for the *qualitative* assessment of the student experience, we will obtain a great deal of important knowledge that we can use to inform and adjust our approach to retention.

These efforts should include:

- An *Entering Student Survey* prior to the first term of enrollment – this survey has already been built and is currently being administered.
- A *New Student Survey* during the first year – to examine the lived experiences of our students and their actual behavior, in comparison to their expectations prior to starting college.
- A comprehensive *Withdrawal Survey* each term – to capture more information about why students did not return to the university, and the issues impacting their ability/desire to return.

We can then determine the other critical touch points in the academic career of a student and what we need to know about their experience at that point in time, to better understand the issues that impact persistence to degree. In addition, asking *common questions* across these assessment points will give us longitudinal data about patterns of engagement, student concerns and challenges, and the evolving expectations of our students, which should be shared with key stakeholders, discussed widely, and used to guide decision-making.

## **The lack of a structured, outcomes oriented FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE is negatively impacting persistence**

Conversations with faculty, staff, and students have indicated that we are not systematically addressing the common transitional issues of the first year in a manner that fosters self-understanding, autonomy, agency, and feelings of connection and mattering, and that there are some immediate issues that need to be addressed:

- *The university needs to create a set of learning/behavioral outcomes* for the first year that will guide the development of a First Year Experience. Having an intentional set of experiences that our students actively engage in during their first year will provide the cornerstone of the broader retention model that will be created.
- *What is the role of faculty and academic departments/schools/colleges in the lives of first-year students?* The First Year Experience needs to be centered around engagement with faculty just as much as it does with the staff who support our students outside of the classroom.
- Knowing the importance of co-curricular engagement to students' sense of belonging, *what expectations should we articulate for involvement outside of the classroom?*
- *It's equally important to develop a brand for the First Year Experience* and to market it through the recruitment and admission process, the orientation process, and throughout the first year. What expectations do we have of our incoming students and how do we expect them to achieve these outcomes? Why are these things important?
- *The Orientation process* needs a comprehensive review to ensure that it is aligned with a set of learning outcomes that map directly to these institutional goals for the first year.
- Despite more than 20% of freshman (based on credits earned) having GPAs below 2.0, *the university does not require completion of an academic intervention program for students placed on Academic Warning or Probation*, and this needs to change.

- Issues around the major change process and the percentage of students who change their major need to be discussed. How can we take steps to ensure (both during the recruitment/admission process and in the first year) that students declare a major that is strong fit with academic interests and abilities? How can we provide greater support for students who discover at a later point that it would be in their best interests to change their major?

### **Issues of COMMUNICATION are broad and multifaceted**

As an institution, we need to examine how we message to incoming students and their families about the transition to college, what it means to “be a Pointer” and the experience of attending UWSP, and how/when we communicate about critical resources...while normalizing the experiences of our students and the value of seeking support. New students need to understand that much of what they are experiencing is universal and their feelings about it are perfectly normal, and that they are “*not the only ones who*” ...are feeling lonely or isolated, overwhelmed with their academics, or finding it challenging to get involved in campus activities that interest them.

At the same time, we also need to examine the larger issue of internal communication and the use of communication systems, to ensure faculty and staff know about critical campus resources that would be valuable to share with students and/or integrate into their course delivery. Departments aren’t always using the same system to document outreach and interaction with students, so knowing who has met with a student, identifying students who have (for example) communicated their intent to stop out or leave the university, or who is not attending but hasn’t withdrawn...is a challenge. In turn, students are expected to learn and use multiple systems to communicate with the university and access information and that is also a significant factor in the challenges we have with many of our outreach efforts.

### **In Summary**

Developing a university-wide retention plan through a process that is inclusive, data-driven, solutions focused, and transparent, will maximize our ability to create an increasingly positive university experience for our students, while also improving persistence (across all four years) and graduation rates. Having this framework in place will also provide faculty and staff with a clearer understanding of how their work contributes to the success of the university in achieving its goals, as outlined in our Strategic Plan, *Purpose Made Possible*. The commitment to supporting the success of our students is obvious across the university; strengthening the collective belief in the value of our individual roles can enhance the campus culture and help students (and their families) feel as though they made a great decision to attend UWSP and earn their degree here!