

50

Ways to Retain
Students and Help
Them Persist to
Graduation

*A Guide for Our Caring
Campus Community*



RETENTION
RATE

= *The percentage of students who return to the same institution*

PERSISTENCE
RATE

= *The percentage of students who return to college at any institution*

Our institution is good at welcoming students to campus. Yet, how do we get them to stay?

It's up to *all* of us, working on an everyday basis to make students feel welcomed, help them through challenges, support their sense of agency and create a culture of belonging. We want them to stick around. And that takes intentional effort on a variety of fronts: academics, mental health, personal well-being, social supports, campus engagement and finding those key connections that make them want to stay. We all play a role.

Students who make it to the graduation finish line improve their life circumstances. Their families often benefit, too, resulting in a positive trickle-down effect. Those who fail to persist, however, often do so with a large amount of student debt on their backs and no improved educational or

occupational circumstances to help them address it. They may face challenges due to financial concerns, food and housing insecurity, being the first in their family to attend college, juggling life as a student parent, returning after military service, aging out of the foster system, caretaking and many other true-to-life realities. Being aware of students' struggles as well as available resources that can help, while also digging in to create personal connection points, can do a world of good.

We're all part of the retention and persistence solution. And the ideas within this guide can be easily implemented on a regular basis to naturally engage in those efforts that truly make a difference.

Our students deserve our very best efforts. Thanks for all you're doing to create a campus culture of purpose, belonging and connection!

Student PERSISTENCE RATES

66.4%

The overall persistence rate of 75% is below the pre-pandemic level, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's June 2022 "Persistence and Retention" report. Here's how it breaks down...

of students were retained at their starting institution for their second year or earned a credential at that institution the year they enrolled

8.6%

of students transferred out and continued enrollment at another institution by the second fall



01: Create Campus Connection Points

Students who feel connected to their campus — through people, activities, organizations and more — will feel welcomed, knowing they *matter*. They're more apt to engage with faculty, staff and other students. They're more likely to feel they've found a school home, where they want to participate in institutional happenings. And they're much more likely to reach out to those they've connected with when the going gets tough, thus helping them persist to graduation.

So, consider simple ways to create campus connection points with students, such as...

Finding out their interests so you can help connect them with a related organization

Inviting them to participate in a group, discussion or event

Connecting them with peers through study groups, informal community building and more

Walking and talking together

02: Don't Give Them the Run-Around

When students are seeking information, chances are it's because they're looking to solve a problem. So, if they're bounced from office to office, that can enhance their sense of frustration. However, if you commit to helping them get the information they need directly, either by making a call, walking them to a campus office or making a clear one-time referral, that can alleviate the run-around and their sense of frustration!

03: Reflect Pride in Our Institution

YOUR COMPLAINTS

=

STUDENTS THINKING

"Hey, this isn't such a great place."

YOUR PRIDE

=

STUDENTS THINKING

"This is a place I'm glad to be a part of!"

04: Honor Their Emotions

When we tell students well-meaning things like, “Cheer up” or “It’s not that bad,” we’re not honoring what they’re feeling. And they have every right to their specific emotions! It’s often about much more than being sad, angry, hurt or fearful. Their emotions typically have other things at the source: the story behind their feelings.

To better help students understand and face their emotions, it helps to broaden their emotional vocabulary, as well as your own. You can do so by tapping into sources such as...

VeryWellFamily.com:
<https://bit.ly/2PyS1bf>

Hoffman Institute:
<https://bit.ly/31QRf4M>

The Conflict Center:
<https://bit.ly/3M0WWQU>

05: Take Notice

Students’ interests and hobbies are often emblazoned across their T-shirts, laptop decals, hats and more. Take notice and ask questions!

- a 5k for a good cause
- a certain band
- a sports team
- an interesting saying
- a concert
- a cultural fabric or flag
- a word with meaning

06: Ask, “What lights you up?”



Honestly, some students may have never considered this. Yet, when you ask this simple question and they start *truly* thinking about it, multiple answers may tumble forth. The endorphins may start to flow. And students are likely to light up right in front of you!

NOTE: Be prepared to share a personal example, in case students aren’t quite sure what you mean.

Connect Informally

07: Attend student-based events as a way to meet and greet them – and make those connections that can make a difference!

CONNECT

- Craft nights & Coffeehouses
- Outdoor programs
- Nighttime food festivities
- Neighborhood & campus service projects
- Entertainment, like plays & concerts
- Cultural fairs
- Talks, readings & interactive discussions

25: Say, “I Thought of You When...”

Don't we all like to be remembered? Students are no different! When you recall something you talked about with an “I thought of you when...” statement, they're bound to feel good.

I thought of you when the Red Sox won and how happy you must be!

I thought of you when I visited a national park and how you told me about your bighorn sheep encounter.

I thought of you when I was baking and all the helpful hacks you shared with me.

I thought of you when I attended a Diwali celebration and remembered the different family traditions you told me about.

27: Use Correct Identifying Pronouns

The personal pronouns that students use are potent identifiers, often tied into their gender identity and sense of self. Pronouns.org explains it like this:

“Using someone’s correct personal pronouns is a way to respect them and create an inclusive environment, just as using a person’s name can be a way to respect them. Just as it can be offensive or even harassing to make up a nickname for someone and call them that nickname against their will, it can be offensive or harassing to guess at someone’s pronouns and refer to them using those pronouns if that is not how that person wants to be known. Or, worse, actively choosing to ignore the pronouns someone has stated that they go by could imply the oppressive notion that intersex, transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people do not or should not exist.”

Work hard to show your respect for students in this important manner.

26: Don't Overdo the Campus Lingo

TO A STUDENT...
WHO KNOWS A TERM = *“This is my place.”*
DOESN'T
KNOW A TERM = *“I don't belong here.”*

First-generation students can't get the collegiate lay of the land from their parents, so they may feel behind when campus terminology is tossed around. And any new student is still trying to find their way, too. Be aware of this when you're using: Acronyms • Nicknames • Terms for Campus Locations • Group Names • Business Names in Town • References to Well-Known Campus Community Members • And More!

28: Help with Goal Setting

Having set goals and expectations can help students stay on track. You can walk them through setting SMART goals, tracking their progress, getting help when needed and celebrating successes.

S M A R T	SPECIFIC.	<i>What will be accomplished and what actions taken?</i>
	MEASURABLE.	<i>How will goal success be measured?</i>
	ACHIEVABLE.	<i>Is it doable? Do you have the skills, resources, etc.?</i>
	RELEVANT.	<i>Does the goal align with broader goals? Why is it important?</i>
	TIME-BOUND.	<i>What's the timeframe for accomplishment?</i>

36: Care – and Let It Show

Caring about our students and putting that care into authentic, thoughtful action can have the biggest impact of all. Students who stick around tend to feel that they matter, that they belong and that they've established consistent connections. Care is the common denominator in all those equations. And it's easy to put in play...

- **ASK**, "How's it going?" And really pay attention to the answer.
- **OPEN DOORS** so they know they can talk with you about what's on their mind.
- **FOLLOW-UP** by asking how their birthday was, how an event they helped plan turned out or how a job interview went.
- **REMEMBER** something important to them: A pet's name, an interest or something they're researching.
- **BE PRESENT** by being attentive and in the moment with students. Make them feel like your priority. After all, they *are*.



37: Report Concerns

Early intervention is a key way to help retain at-risk students experiencing academic, financial, social or personal issues. And you're a big part of that intervention process, as campus eyes and ears.

If you **NOTICE** something, **SAY** something

Your observations about a student being hungry, anxious, struggling financially, grieving a relationship or dealing with family issues make a difference. Talk with the appropriate people about your concerns: a supervisor, an advisor, a behavioral intervention team, a counselor, etc. Intervention can then occur in a caring, compassionate way that best serves that student.

38: Welcome Families

Today's students are often looking after someone, whether it's children, parents, grandparents or other family members. This can be both a privilege and a challenge, splitting their time and attention as they also try to put their college life into the mix.

So, why not determine ways that you and your office can welcome families, so students don't have to choose?

Family-Friendly Programs

Lollipops in Your Office for Kids

Campus Trick or Treating Initiatives

Grandparent Day Activities

Bring Your Family Member to Work Day