Best Practices: Undergraduate Student Retention and Graduation Rates

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**Best Practices: Undergraduate Student Retention and Graduation Rates**

Each year, the U.S. News and World Report produces a list of college rankings that highlights exceptional undergraduate graduation and retention rates at institutions of higher education. While Marquette University has maintained consistently high rates, their ranking has dropped over the last several years as other institutions have increased their graduation rates, retention rates, and graduation rate predicted performance. As a result, our research focuses on identifying best practices in undergraduate student retention and graduation rates at some of these acclaimed 4-year colleges and universities.

Our client provided us with a list of colleges and universities that had increased these metrics in recent years, and we chose to target 20 institutions. We selected our institutions based on the number of metrics in which they had improved as well as the institution's similarity to Marquette with respect to size, location, student demographic, student academic profile, mission, and other relevant criteria. After initially reaching out to our 20 desired institutions, we were able to conduct best practice research on 16 of them. Through our conversations with administrators knowledgeable about retention initiatives at each of these universities, we uncovered a variety of unique and intentional approaches to retention that we then categorized into themes. These themes highlight both student-centered retention initiatives, including first-year programming, support for specific student populations, experiential and active learning, and residence life, as well as administrative-centered retention initiatives, including early-alert systems, faculty involvement, academic advising, financial aid, and policy changes.

Retention is a widespread campus effort and as such, the findings across themes tended to overlap (e.g. first-year initiatives and support for specific student populations). Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Departure, however, helps us to identify how widespread retention and graduation
efforts interact to collectively impact a student’s decision to depart. Tinto’s theory can be broken into three phases: separation, transition, and incorporation. Within these phases, Tinto addresses how retention is tied to students’ pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments, and the overall institutional experience.

Effective orientation and pre-orientation programs provide both holistic and targeted support for students during the separation and transition phases based on pre-entry attributes (i.e. amount of previous preparation and schooling, parental level of education, race); first-year initiatives maintain that support, while aiding in student’s development of goals and commitments and providing students with opportunities for social integration. Initiatives that support specific student populations additionally address the unique components of academic engagement and social integration during the transition stage related to students’ varying pre-entry attributes. Experiential and active learning opportunities also bridge the gap between the separation and transition stages while fostering a sense of active engagement and commitment to an institution. Residence life is another piece of the institutional experience and transition phase that can affect a student’s decision to persist, especially in regards to the social integration that takes place with staff and other students through both campus-wide and in-hall residence life programming.

Early-alert systems are used to identify issues students are experiencing with transitioning and incorporating, both formally and informally as well as academically and socially, and address these concerns before a student decides to depart. Faculty involvement is also part of the academic integration that influences a student’s decision to depart within the transition phase. Similarly, academic advising is a form of support that falls within a student’s academic system and can affect overall academic integration and incorporation. Financial aid
may also impact how committed a student is to the institution as well as their overall institutional experience. Finally, depending on the specific institutional policies, policy changes may affect a student’s decision to depart during any of the three stages of separation, transition, and integration.

### Student-Centered Retention Initiatives

This section will focus on student-centered retention and graduation efforts including first-year initiatives, support for specific student populations, experiential and active learning, and residence life.

#### First-Year Initiatives

Retention efforts need to begin with students’ first interactions with an institution (Pendakur, 2016). Because of this, many institutions are paying even closer attention to their first-year programs. The identified best practice institutions approached first-year initiatives through Orientation, First-Year Seminars, and Calling Programs.

**Pre-orientation and orientation.** Many times, the first interaction students have with an institution after admission is during orientation programs. Because of this, schools such as Duquesne University, have sessions included in their orientation program for specific populations. Duquesne has a session for commuter students during which anyone who identifies with the commuter status meets and learns about campus and its resources from the commuting perspective. During this type of targeted orientation session, current commuter students share their experience, answer questions, and provide tips for incoming commuter students. This approach can be utilized for any specific student population, such as students of color, education majors, or athletes, to name a few. If concurrent sessions during orientation do not fit with the established schedule or meet the needs of the population, pre and post-orientation sessions are a
common alternative. Duquesne offers a pre-orientation session for all of their first-year, incoming multicultural students two days before regular orientation takes place. During this time, “participants can check-in early and engage in various activities on campus with culturally diverse students, alumni and members of the Pittsburgh community” (J. Douglas, personal communication, March 3, 2016).

**First-year seminars & courses.** Pepperdine University, Edgewood College, and Baylor University are among some of the best practice institutions that have courses for their incoming first-year students with similar goals of introducing students to collegiate resources, increasing students’ academic skill sets, and building relationships between students, faculty, and staff. At all three institutions, students are able to choose from a variety of first-year course offerings with a focus on a topic of interest to them. However, there are some pieces of content that remain consistent throughout all first-year course offerings, such as common reading or self-reflection activities. These programs are mandatory for students, are led by students, faculty and/or staff across the institution, and according to one staff member at Baylor, “have been a huge factor in moving the needle on retention” (M. Cohenour, personal communication, March 10, 2016).

Beyond achieving the aforementioned goals, these programs also help students understand the institution’s mission, inspire their sense of belonging, and contribute to long-term retention.

Edgewood College developed a more extensive, three-tiered program called COR, named in recognition of Edgewood’s motto *cor ad cor loquitur*. The first component of COR is a semester-long, first-year course, which is followed by involvement in an experiential learning community during sophomore or junior year and a capstone project during senior year. Faculty members offer their weekly course based on personal areas of interest; for example, a professor may structure the course around coffee and throughout the semester, students analyze the social
impact of coffee, its history, how fair trade intersects with it, and other related topics. This approach allows students to develop meaningful relationships with faculty members while also providing engaging ways to enhance students’ critical thinking, analytical writing, and general academic skills. Pepperdine and Baylor’s programs are also thematic in nature, with students self-selecting into their preferred course based on identity or interest. Regardless of the selected course content, all of the best practice schools make a point to provide the course administrators with appropriate training. That training may include diversity components, leadership development, data on incoming student demographics, or tips on creating communities.

**Calling programs.** Boston University, University of Miami, and Vanderbilt University implement a calling program to engage with their first-year students. Boston University selects a group of professionals who dedicate a portion of their time to calling every single student four weeks into the semester. The goal is to gain insight into how the student is doing, address any problems they are having, and connect them with a person who is invested in their development and success. At the University of Miami, undergraduate students are hired to call first-year students during the spring semester. Besides simply checking in, they also conduct an informal satisfaction survey with them, which has become a predictive retention practice.

**Summary.** There is no one, right way to conduct first-year initiatives, but merely having them significantly affects retention and graduation. However, it can be noted that efforts that meet students on a personal, individual level – such as calling programs or first-year seminars that leave space for student choice – lead to more positive results in terms of retention and graduation rates. These initiatives take many months of pre-planning and strong cross-campus collaborations, and need to be molded around changing student characteristics and needs. Our team will recommend that as Marquette revamps their orientation and first-year programming,
the institution takes a considerable amount of time to investigate the variety of options available for first-year programming as well as consider how they are meeting the specific, personal needs of Marquette’s students and their families through early intervention efforts.

**Supporting Specific Student Populations**

Student retention and graduation initiatives cannot always be one-size-fits-all in order to be effective. Certain student populations might benefit from tailored resources that address their unique needs and issues. One example of this is USD, which has found success with their Black Student Resource Center (BSRC). Administrators were noticing that some black students would congregate in a common area near a mentor or administrator’s office, but there were no formalized programs specifically for these students. Administrators then conducted focus groups to improve their understanding of the needs of black students on campus and determined that a physical space staffed with a dedicated professional would contribute to the retention of black students. Since establishing the BSRC, the university has experienced an increase in black student retention rates. This will be important to consider in our final recommendations as Marquette’s data shows that African-American students are retained at lower rates. Research from Johnson (2013) found that comprehensive programs with a focus on academic, social, and cultural development are key to enhancing the success of African American students in college. USD targets each of these developmental areas in the programming and services provided by the BSRC. This research, along with the success that USD has had with their BSRC, will inform our recommendations for future retention practices specifically of African-American students at Marquette.

Baylor uncovered a need for early programming for their first-generation students, and, as a result, created the Summer Advantage program. The goal of the program is to help students
build the cultural capital necessary to thrive and remain at Baylor prior to their official start in September. Students are provided free housing, introduced to important resources across campus, and earn six credit hours at a discounted rate. The group also meets once per week during the program to hear from first-generation faculty and staff members at the university. During the school year, the university also holds weekly meetings so that first-generation students who were unable to participate in Summer Advantage can gain similar access to resources, inspiring stories, and peer relationships.

Research has also shown that a key part of supporting first-generation students is supporting their families (Pendakur, 2016). DePaul University works closely with the admissions office to identify first-generation families immediately after admission and invite them to a pre-orientation session. Orientation can be overwhelming for first-generation families with the vast amount of information disseminated; therefore, this pre-orientation event helps inform families what to expect at orientation and explain the purpose of orientation. Families are provided with an opportunity to meet various staff and faculty who will serve as resources to their students, ask questions in a less intimidating setting, and acquire a knowledge base upon which they can confidently build further at orientation. DePaul also hosts a post-orientation event right before the start of school for first-generation families. During this time, they readdress the critical pieces of information from orientation and reinforce the institutional support that they offer to the students and their families. These efforts to support first-generation students also have ties to the aforementioned pre-orientation and orientation initiatives.

Many of our best practice institutions supported low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color through mentorship programs, most of which started during students’ first year in college. DePaul University created a Men of Color Initiative Leadership
Academy: a biweekly, seminar-style mentorship program consisting of workshops, presentations, and self-reflection. There is “continuous conversation about the role of students’ identities as men of color [and how that] plays into their experiences on campus” (Bobb & Mata, as cited in Pendakur, 2016, p. 29). In addition, the program recognizes that these individuals may have received inadequate preparation for college, so there is intentional focus on building time management skills, study and goal setting habits, and help-seeking behaviors. They also bring in guest speakers from across campus to help students form meaningful connections to campus resources. Finally, there is concerted effort to build relationships among the cohort of men, as well as get them involved in other extracurricular activities and groups to continue building a network of support.

Loyola University Chicago offers three mentorship programs through their Department of Student Diversity & Multicultural Affairs (SDMA): STARS (Students Together Are Reaching Success) Brothers for Excellence and LUCES (Latino University Chicago Empowering Sisters). STARS has been at Loyola for nearly 30 years; students who identify as first-generation or students of color voluntarily enter this year-long program and are mentored by upperclassmen. Grant-funded scholarships provide compensation for the mentors, but student tuition fees support the program itself. Brothers for Excellence is another mentorship program for men of color that is open to non-white, first-time freshmen or transfer students. Students have one student mentor and one faculty or staff mentor in this initiative. LUCES was established two years ago and provides mentor-relationships between student females of color and professional women of color on campus. In all of these programs, the goal is to make students feel like they belong and are part of a community on Loyola’s campus that shares and supports their identities. The mentors meet with their mentees once per week, work through any academic and social difficulties, share
resources, and participate in social events. Loyola utilizes an online assessment module that gathers both qualitative and quantitative data about program effectiveness and student satisfaction to gauge the success of these programs.

An incredibly important component of these mentorship programs is the connection between Loyola’s SDMA and the Undergraduate Admission Office. SDMA works closely with the Undergraduate Admission Office to recruit first-generation students and students of color and also to send information about these programs out immediately after qualifying students are admitted. They are also currently working to establish a Pen Pal mentorship program that would immediately connect new admits with currently enrolled students who share their identities.

In regards to mentoring other student populations, the University of San Diego (USD) discovered that their out-of-state students were experiencing difficulties transitioning and, in turn, had issues with retention of this student population. In response, they created the “Out-of-State Student Program,” which partners out-of-state student admits with currently enrolled students also from their home state. The currently enrolled students reach out to the incoming students, offering them an opportunity to ask questions and form a relationship with another student at USD. There is no formal commitment to this mentorship beyond the initial phone call, but most do stay in touch for at least the first few weeks. There is also a cookout at the beginning of the year for faculty and out-of-state students that provides students with an opportunity to meet more people and eliminate feelings of isolation. USD found that creating connections among the out-of-state students helps normalize the experience of being from outside the state of California.

Finally, Drexel University has a unique mentoring program tailored to students on the autism spectrum. Students who self-identify as being on the spectrum and choose to participate
in the program are paired with an undergraduate student mentor to help them with academic or social concerns such as social anxiety and independent living. Social events give students in the program a platform to practice and model important social etiquette skills in college. The mentoring programs and social events also foster a sense of belonging, which much of the research on retention indicates as a primary factor in students persisting to graduation (Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

Overall, mentoring programs have proven specifically helpful in supporting specific student populations with lower retention rates. As Marquette works to improve the success of all its students, it will be important for them to consider how and if implementing mentorship programs can positively impact their efforts.

**Experiential and Active Learning**

In the simplest of explanations, experiential learning is learning by doing. Experiential learning comes in many forms: service learning, internships, field experiences, co-ops, and participation in other off-campus programs. This type of learning enables students to apply what they are learning in class to a real-world setting or situation and facilitates a connection between knowledge and action. Several of our best practice institutions highlighted the importance of experiential learning in their retention and graduation persistence efforts.

Tulane University has an entire office devoted to experiential learning. Undergraduates are required to participate in service learning in addition to internships or externships, which helps them use their knowledge and skills to improve the surrounding community as well as connect their academic learning to professional experiences. The school is looking to enhance their experiential learning programming through an initiative that would give students the opportunity to shadow alumni in an area of professional interest. Noel-Levitz (2011) cites
practical work experiences in a student’s intended major as one of the most effective retention practices a 4-year university could provide to students. Tulane’s internship initiatives are a prime example of this type of retention practice in action.

Pepperdine University facilitates active learning through different types of retreats that foster personal and spiritual development and engage students in community building with peers and professionals on campus. An example of these experiences includes a sophomore retreat in which 100 sophomores spend time with their peers during a spiritual getaway at a nearby mountain. Another retreat held in San Francisco occurs during the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend and focuses on students, faculty, and staff learning about the Civil Rights Movement. Pepperdine provides these types of retreats free of charge to students, making it an accessible way for students to learn and develop holistically while forming bonds with faculty, staff members, and peers.

Pepperdine also sees study abroad opportunities as transformative learning experiences that keep students persisting in their education. The university offers a comprehensive study abroad program that has enabled 60% of sophomores to travel internationally for the entire academic year. Pepperdine owns seven housing facilities around the world that provide a sense of community for students while they are learning and developing abroad. Duquesne also offers study abroad opportunities for students, and they have a unique partnership with the University College Dublin (UCD). For example, when Duquesne students study in Dublin, they are able to live with fellow Duquesne students while also immersing themselves in UCD cultural activities like theater programs and athletic teams. Service learning and programs at Duquesne also create other avenues for students to learn by experience, as they get to conduct research that will positively impact the community and partake in other hands-on projects.
Drexel University boasts a renowned co-op program in which students alternate between semesters of school and semesters of work. A staggering 98% of eligible undergraduate students participate in the co-op program, and it is a major impetus for students choosing to attend Drexel, despite its significant cost. The co-op program provides students the opportunity to apply what they learn in the classroom, actively learn outside of the classroom, and gain meaningful practical experience that contributes to their vocational and personal goals. The program necessitates that students are constantly in a state of transition between on-campus and their co-op sites both nationally and internationally. Drexel is currently working on ways to better prepare and debrief students before and after their co-op terms to assist in their transitions.

A common thread in many of the aforementioned experiential learning practices is that they provide students the chance to apply learning to real-world situations, making it easier to see the value of their education. Additionally, they frequently involve faculty and staff participation, so students are able to build relationships and connections with campus professionals. This will be important to keep in mind as we form recommendations, as Tinto (1993) asserts that these solid connections with peers and faculty members are necessary to student retention and success.

**Residence Life**

Residence life is a critical component of social support and integration for many undergraduate students and can greatly affect decisions to persist at an institution. Many of the best practice institutions, including Pepperdine University, Edgewood College, Loyola University Chicago, and Tulane University, require first- and second-year students to live on campus. Tulane University, specifically, found that if students live on campus their first two years they are more likely to persist and graduate from Tulane.
Within the residence halls, additional programming with an intentional focus on improving retention and graduation rates also takes place. For example, Pepperdine University’s goal is 70% residential housing for students. They have 17 residence halls on ‘Res Road’ with 50 students per hall; currently there is a wait list of 300 juniors and seniors that would like to live in the on-campus housing. By living on campus, they explain that students do not get ‘lost.’ Each house is divided by gender and has a resident advisor, a spiritual life advisor, and three staff members that live in the house. Pepperdine also holds a Freshmen House Cup, which connects freshmen to each other across all houses by competing for house cup points based on attendance at events, fundraising, and other large-scale university programming. There are significant prizes awarded to the house winner.

**Living learning communities.** Vanderbilt University offers many living learning communities that they cite as having a significant impact on student happiness and retention. All first-year students live in one of the 10 houses, and after their first year on campus, students can elect to apply for other types of campus housing. These alternative options are hugely attractive to students and include communities focusing on, for example, the engaged citizen or language, or can be project-based or alternative lifestyle-based. Assessment of these living learning communities shows that students living in LLCs are more likely to have conversations about coursework in the residence halls as well as have in-depth conversations, that some might perceive as difficult, about race, gender, and class. These conversations contribute to social and academic integration and connect students to the campus community, making them more likely to persist and graduate from the institution. University of San Diego also offers LLCs, in which 100% of first-year students live; they take a class together, live together, and attend events together for their first year on campus.
Summary. While Marquette already requires all first- and second-year students to live on campus in residence halls, it is helpful to see that our best practice institutions support this effort and cite it as a contribution to their current retention and graduation rates as well. Furthermore, additional residence hall programming, whether this be a Freshmen World Cup event or LLC offerings, as a tool to increase retention on campus have prompted us to look closer at Marquette’s residence life efforts to provide recommendations on how to improve residence life on campus to tie it more intentionally to efforts to increase retention.

Administrative-Centered Initiatives

This section will focus on administrative-centered retention and graduation efforts including early alert systems, faculty involvement, academic advising, financial aid, and policy changes.

Early Alert Systems

Early alert systems are designed to identify students at risk of departure early in order to provide proactive intervention to increase the likelihood of persistence. Of the best practice institutions for which data is available, twelve are currently using an early alert system of some kind. Early alert systems come in many different forms from homegrown, university developed systems to third-party contracted systems. A handful of institutions use more than one early alert system in order to have a comprehensive system that includes student self-reporting, faculty reporting, and information sharing.

University developed systems. Of the twelve institutions that currently rely on early alert systems for retention efforts, half are using systems that were developed at their own institutions. University developed systems often focus on data collected from faculty and advisors. At Edgewood College, faculty are required to input information about freshmen
students every four weeks. This information includes identifying students who have missed two or more classes and/or two assignments. Furthermore, if any faculty is concerned about any student, regardless of the grade level or reason, he or she can input an academic alert notice, which is received by both the student and the student’s advisor. American University uses a similar homegrown system of faculty input in order to create a culture where it is not simply the student’s job to seek help. Faculty submit early warnings, and then necessary staff are notified in order to proactively reach out to students.

Baylor University has a system of both academic warnings and referrals. In the sixth week of classes, faculty are required to submit academic warning for any student they believe to be at risk. These warnings could occur for a number of reasons including, but not limited to, poor grades, difficulties with families at home, missing class, and late assignments. In addition to the mandatory reporting in the sixth week, faculty can submit academic referrals at any time throughout the semester in order to continue tracking students who may be in need of intervention. Boston University, Drexel University, and the University of Miami also use similar homegrown systems that focus on faculty identification and advisor outreach.

One innovative university developed system was created at Tulane University and integrates information and includes stakeholders from both academic and student affairs. Just this year, Tulane started an organized effort to increase cross-departmental sharing in order to identify students who are considering departure and provide more holistic support to these students. This system relies on advisors to indicate at-risk students and notifies all key personnel across campus who the student may benefit from interaction with (e.g. Associate Dean for Retention, financial aid office, faculty, residence life, student activities offices, etc.). In addition to this system and an academic reporting tool for faculty, Tulane also uses a non-academic
reporting system for student affairs professionals who have interacted with particular students and are concerned about their persistence at the institution or overall wellbeing.

**Third-party systems.** Half of the best practice institutions are using, or are currently in the process of implementing, a third-party system. A number of schools use more than one third-party system or one third-party system in conjunction with a homegrown system. Starfish, one of many third-party early alert systems, is currently used by Loyola University Chicago, Duquesne University, and University of San Diego. Different features of Starfish include helping identify at-risk students, providing a communication platform between staff and students, and helping students identify and connect to various campus resources (Starfish, 2016).

Another system commonly used by best practice institutions is Mapworks. Currently used by five best practice institutions (i.e. American University, Baylor University, the Catholic University of America, the University of San Diego, and the University of Miami), Mapworks is a system that relies on students’ self-reported data in conjunction with other metrics (i.e. institution variables, academic data, college experience data, admissions data, and the student profile) in order to identify students who may be in need of intervention (Skyfactor, 2016). At American University, students voluntarily take the Mapworks assessment in the fourth week of their first year of classes. Despite voluntary participation, the assessment usually garners a 90% response rate. Baylor University is another institution that is using the Mapworks assessment. Professionals at Baylor see the value in self-reported data because it honors students voice. However, because self-reported data does not always offer the institution the whole picture for each individual student, every school using Mapworks couples it with either a different third-party system or a university-developed system.
A handful of institutions also use other third-party early alert systems in order to identify at-risk students. Baylor University, in addition to the homegrown system and Mapworks, relies on the Student Success Collaborative for its predictive analytics, especially when helping students identify and change majors which is a significant theme at Baylor University. Catholic University of America, after unsuccessful attempts at using Engaged Minds and Hobson’s Retain, is currently looking at using Simplicity in conjunction with Mapworks. Southern Methodist University uses a system called Grades First, focusing on the early alert function and functions designed specifically to support student athletes and summer bridge students. Texas Christian University, one institution not currently using an early alert system, is considering using Civitas in order to further increase student retention and graduation.

**Outreach after data collection.** Collecting data from university developed or third-party systems is the first step to improving retention through early alert systems. The second step is how an institution uses the data in order to impact student persistence. Institutions handle this process differently, but most have identified a point person either in an advising office, academic department, or a retention specialist who is responsible for coordinating student outreach. The following are examples of how some of the best practices institutions handle outreach.

Edgewood College uses a centralized advising model, and early warning notices are located in Academic Advising Services. Once received, advisors focus on personalized intervention with students who are identified as at-risk. Similarly, the Student Success Center at Baylor University is responsible for monitoring and coordinating outreach academic warnings and referrals. The Manager of Student Success and Retention at American University uses information gathered from the homegrown faculty system and Mapworks to ensure an effective institutional response for students at risk of departure. The Manager of Student Success and
Retention also communicates with the professional responsible for retention efforts in each academic department. This person will then be responsible for flagging at-risk students and ensuring that they get the support they need, oftentimes including an in-person meeting.

**Summary.** Marquette University does not currently use any type of early alert system in order to identify and reach out to students who may be at risk of departure. Research from the best practice institutions clearly shows that utilizing an early alert system, whether a university developed system, third-party system, or combination, is a standard practice for those schools who have seen recent gains in retention and graduation rates. Due to the fact that 75% of best practice institutions utilize some sort of early alert system, Marquette should spend time identifying their needs for an early alert system, which will determine if they need to develop their own system or begin a contract with a third-party system. Following Baylor University’s model, a committee made up of stakeholders from across campus should be in place to roll out the new system, which would include: getting faculty, staff, and students on board; ensuring proper outreach to students once data is collected; and fielding any questions. This finding will be included in our recommendations to the Office of the Provost as one way to contribute to increasing retention and graduation rates.

**Faculty Involvement**

Based on Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure, a number of empirical studies have confirmed the importance of informal academic integration. Faculty are a key component to this type of integration. Based on our interviews with best practice institutions, we found that faculty involvement is difficult to cultivate, but when done successfully, can have a significant impact on student retention and graduation. Based on information received from our targeted best practice institutions, the most common type of faculty involvement relating to retention and
graduation efforts was through early alert system reporting. Faculty were involved with providing information to identify at-risk students at at least half of the best practice institutions. Without faculty participating in the reporting of students who may be at-risk academically, it would be virtually impossible to identify a large portion of the at-risk population, and in turn provide proactive intervention for these students, because faculty tend to have the most academic contact with current students.

In addition to involvement in early alert system efforts, faculty contribute to students’ informal academic integration in two innovative ways at American University and Pepperdine University. At American University, every LLC is academically oriented and has a faculty director. American University identifies faculty who are interested in leading these communities. In addition to teaching a class for the students in the LLC, the faculty member lives in the residence hall with the students, providing significant support and guidance to the community members. Similarly, at Pepperdine University many faculty and staff live in on-campus condos, which are accessible to students; these faculty and staff often have students over to their condos for dinner and discussions. This fosters deeper faculty engagement with students on a personal level but also opens the door for engagement on a professional level when faculty encourage students to get involved with their research and publishing.

Faculty involvement varies greatly across best practice institutions and is undoubtedly different at Marquette as well. However, because faculty involvement is a key component to student integration, it would be in the Office of the Provost’s interest to conduct an assessment on faculty involvement, including ways in which faculty engage with students presently and where innovative ways of engagement could be incorporated (e.g. living and directing LLCs).
Data from current Marquette faculty will determine the course of actions for future involvement initiatives.

**Academic Advising**

Students’ experience with academic advising can play a vital role in their success and persistence toward graduation. Academic advisors help students navigate through the resources and policies of a university and set up an overall roadmap for their educational goals, major, and individual courses. Without a helpful academic advisor and an efficient and effective academic advising system, students may become frustrated and decide to depart from the institution.

**Centralized and decentralized advising structures.** Through research of our best practice institutions, we found a mixture of centralized and decentralized academic advising models. However, nearly all of the institutions who did not currently have a centralized model either were moving toward a centralized structure or believed a centralized structure would better serve their student population.

Edgewood College, Catholic University of America, Tulane University, and Loyola University Chicago all have centralized advising services, and Drexel University is also moving toward a centralized advising structure. Most of these institutions have centralized advising for freshmen and sometimes even sophomores but move toward faculty and major advising once students begin upper-level courses in their majors. This professionalization of advising core, by having designated full-time academic advisors on campus, was cited by many contacts at the institutions as one of the top reasons why there have been recent retention and graduation rate gains at their institutions. The developmental needs of students at the freshmen and sophomore level do not differ significantly across majors and are better served by centralized, professional advisors (G. Hoefling, personal communication, March 23, 2016). These institutions found that
freshmen and sophomores often have more administrative questions that professional advisors can easily answer, whereas upperclassmen need a faculty advisor in their designated area for major-specific questions and concerns.

**Additional academic support/coaching.** Institutions with additional academic support, such as success programming/coaching, also experience additional success in retaining and graduating undergraduate students. Catholic University of America is an example of an institution with academic support in addition to their academic advising. This institution offers an academic coaching program that they cite as their greatest retention tool for students who are struggling and at-risk of not graduating, including probation students as well as first-generation and other typically at-risk populations. The coaches act as part of a counseling model and work specifically with students on probation. This counseling model focuses on students’ strengths and abilities, and the coach partners with the student to build a unique action plan. The relationship between student and coach is different than that of an advisor or counselor relationship because the coach takes more of an aggressive, intrusive approach to working with the student. Coaches are strategic, and the university entrusts the coaches with a lot of responsibility to use whatever practices they think are best to motivate the student. CUA has seen first-generation students benefit tremendously from the coaching program and has also noticed an overall Grade Point Average (GPA) increase. It also largely benefits probation students as a whole as they have time to increase their GPA and build skills one-on-one with a coach rather than being immediately dismissed from the university. This program is currently structured within academic advising.

Tulane also has a success coaching staff, with a caseload of 3 to 5% of the student population, that intervenes with struggling students and has therefore improved graduation and
retention on campus. As part of this program, similar to CUA’s program, students meet one-on-one with coaches on a regular basis and the program focuses on students’ strengths to help them meet their goals. Students must apply or be nominated in order to meet with a coach.

**Peer mentorship programs.** Peer advisors are another unique form of academic support that, in addition to academic advising, are offered at both American University College of Arts and Sciences and Baylor University. At American University, their peer mentorship program in the College of Arts and Sciences has had very positive effects, especially on male students, and other colleges at the university are currently attempting to mimic the program. Peers have individual advising appointments, and the specific goal of this program is to assist with the college transition process for undergraduate students. At Baylor, any student can sign up for an academic mentor, but students on probation are required to sign up for a mentor and participate in an academic skills class. The peer mentors are graduate students, who work as mentors for their graduate assistantship. Mentors are matched with students by Student Success Center staff based on personality, academic discipline, and other pertinent characteristics. Graduate mentors are taught motivational interviewing techniques to work with the undergraduate students.

**Summary.** In terms of academic advising structures on college campuses, these best practice institutions have identified centralized advising structures as effective and ideal to best meet the needs of students. Furthermore, since academic concerns are often cited as a main reason for students’ decision to depart an institution, additional support for at-risk students, such as academic coaching programs or peer mentorship opportunities, can contribute to an increase in student persistence. This information will be helpful as we form recommendations for the Office of the Provost, specifically with respect to restructuring Marquette’s current advising
system and incorporating some additional academic support into academic advising for at-risk students.

Financial Aid

Financial aid packages can have a large impact on a student’s decision to depart from an institution. If a student realizes he or she can no longer afford to attend the university, or has to work a significant number of hours off campus, the student will likely not be retained and graduate from the institution. Several of the best practice institutions have innovative programs in place related to financial aid offerings, such as University of Miami, American University, and Vanderbilt University, which not only help in recruitment efforts but also play a role in undergraduate student retention.

University of Miami has a Graduation Grant program in which program staff reach out to students who are no longer enrolled at the university but are 15 credits or less short of graduation. After the student signs a contract and applies for financial aid, the Provost’s Office then pays for 100% of the difference of the student’s tuition to finish their degree. This effort is in partnership with career advising and academic support programs. Last year, 30 students met the criteria, 10 participated in the program, and all 10 of the students were retained and graduated. Additionally, 70% of the remaining 20 students that did not participate in the program returned to the university and were 100% retained with an increased GPA.

American University made the switch from 75% of its financial aid being merit-based to 75% of their aid being need-based, which was cited as a large contributing factor to increased retention. Additionally, Duquesne University has $50,000 available every academic year for emergency scholarships for 27 to 30 students that allows them to register for classes for the following year without worrying about the stress of finances during their finals week.
Furthermore, Vanderbilt University no longer offers need-based financial aid loans to undergraduate students; instead, they provide scholarships and grant assistance in order to meet 100% of a family’s demonstrated financial need. This initiative would not be possible without targeted fundraising efforts and generous donations; since 2008, over $200 million has been raised for this undergraduate scholarship endowment.

As we originally predicted in our discussions surrounding retention, financial aid packages and the ability to afford the education one is receiving are cited as frequent reasons why students depart institutions. While it may be obvious to just offer more financial aid to students so that they stay on campus and graduate, the funds to do so are not always at the disposal of institutions, including Marquette. But, it is helpful as we look at this best practice data to note that there are other innovative financial aid programs that universities have in place, such as the Graduation Grant program or emergency scholarships, that have a large effect on retention but are at a lower cost to the university than simply increasing financial aid. These will be mentioned as a focus area in the recommendations that we provide with our executive summary to the Office of the Provost.

**Policy Changes**

In addition to creating and implementing programs to support retention, it is also important to be mindful of the policies in place that can inhibit or promote students’ success in college. Among the institutions interviewed, we observed three main types of policy changes that were made to improve retention: academic, administrative, procedural.

**Academic.** American University made a change within their academic departments that has since provided an additional layer of retention support for students. Instead of having one person responsible for retention initiatives for the entire campus, they have identified one person
within each academic discipline to serve as a retention specialist. This allows them to identify problems areas and student concerns on a more micro level and take more specific action to remedy them.

Southern Methodist University (SMU) and Loyola University Chicago made an intentional effort to analyze and revise their core curriculums to ensure that their students, specifically transfer students in the case of SMU, were able to make it through their academic programs in a reasonable amount of time. Tulane took academic performance one step further and honed in on GPA regulations. In the past, if students did not meet the GPA requirement for their program, they were simply asked to leave the institution. Now, they intervene and offer appropriate remedial support in the form of tutors or resources before dismissing any students. Our contact noted, “although that effort is a low hanging fruit, we’ve seen a significant increase because of it” (S. Lusnia, K. Busby, K. Grant, personal communication, March 24, 2016).

Finally, Loyola University Chicago has also committed to hiring a professional within the next five years that will solely focus on bridging the gap between academic and student affairs, hoping to construct more cohesive retention efforts between the two areas.

**Administrative.** American University’s Manager of Student Success and Retention stated, “We need top-down buy-in from the Provost and President,” (J. Ellis, personal communication, February 29, 2016). Boston University has taken that thought seriously; the President has determined that it is a ‘fireable offense’ if a faculty or staff member does not take the time to reach out to students who appear to be struggling. They promote the ideal that it is everyone’s responsibility to support retention.

Other academic and student affairs administrators have created committees that simply, yet profoundly, set aside intentional time to discuss matters of retention. University of San Diego
created a committee for Undergraduate Student Success that includes mid- to senior-level administrators from departments such as enrollment management, wellness services, residence life, diversity and inclusion, career development, and university ministry. The group meets every other week, evaluates data and effectiveness of initiatives, and develops recommendations focused on retention. Their recommendations are reported to the President, Provost, and Deans of the academic colleges. Similarly, University of Miami facilitates an enrollment meeting once per week that includes individuals from residence life, student accounts, academics, associate provost office, registrar, institutional research, and admissions. They discuss retention issues in the light of admissions by looking at what the numbers are, where they stand, and what they need to do to improve their services.

Administrators at Edgewood College created a strategic retention council as well as a national, award-winning retention plan to guide their efforts. The plan was created organically from Edgewood’s assessment data and includes five comprehensive retention-based goals along with objectives and benchmarks to meet those goals. For example, one objective focuses on “creating a culture of timely completion.” The measure for this objective is the Senior Exit Survey, and the criterion of success are the percentage of students graduating within the time expected and the satisfaction with time it took to complete the degree. By identifying specific goals as well as administrators to spearhead each initiative, Edgewood has increased both accountability and success in terms of retention on their campus.

Finally, administrators across University of Miami’s campus are working to create a collective calendar of retention initiatives. This will allow them to see which departments have an active role in retention at different points in the year, identify the variety of resources
available at varying times, and ensure that promoting retention is a consistent, even responsibility across the university.

**Procedural.** Departure and early prediction processes received special attention at schools that were recognized for improved retention and graduation rates. The University of Miami revised their ‘withdrawing student’ process, which now requires every withdrawing student to visit the Cane Success Center to complete a grid that allows them to identify and weigh the reasons they are leaving. One of the Cane staff members will then help students analyze their grid, talk through the withdrawal process, and present alternative options to withdrawing. For example, if a student is withdrawing for academic reasons, they will suggest taking some non-degree courses; if a student is leaving for social reasons, they will partner them with a peer on campus to build connections and opportunities to connect with the campus community.

For those students that still depart from University of Miami, they are required to complete an exit survey. This survey has provided insight into the multitude of factors that contribute to attrition on their campus and has since fueled their remedial efforts. The survey has also supported faculty and staff in more effectively identifying at-risk behaviors and personally reach out to students who are traditionally at higher risk of departure from the institution. Vanderbilt University also strives to identify at-risk behaviors and has implemented three small procedures to help predisposed students. They first conduct a mid-semester grade deficiency check and then further identify struggling students through requested Resident Assistant reports and faculty feedback. To conclude, they identify the on-campus professional with the closest relationship to the student, and require a meeting between the two individuals. Although this
three-step process was noted as resource and time intensive, Vanderbilt has seen positive results in their overall retention because of it.

University of Miami, Loyola University Chicago, Texas Christian University (TCU), and American University, have redesigned their admissions processes to increase retention. At Miami, they are constantly analyzing how their recruitment team is presenting and crafting the image of Miami. Research has shown that the more accurate a student’s perception of an institution is when they begin their studies their first year, the greater the chances they will be retained (Pike, Hanson, & Childress, 2014). Loyola and TCU have become more selective in their admissions processes; as a result, they are admitting students who are more qualified, prepared, and determined to succeed at their institutions. American University adopted their admissions procedure first by raising admissions standards but also by instituting ways to maintain high diversity in their student population. As an initial solution, they are piloting a test-optional admissions requirement. Instead of requiring the scores, they are asking students why they want to be at American, acknowledging that initial institutional commitment is important for retention. They feel that if they can build a culture of students who really want to be there, this will increase overall attraction to and retention at American University just as much as admitting high quality students would.

Additional. Two policy changes that fall outside these three dominant categories revolve around residence life operations and financial restrictions. Pepperdine University pays special attention to their housing policies. They recognize that it is not possible for every student to return to their homes during breaks, such as international students and former foster youth, and because of that, they allow their residence halls to be open 365 days of the year at a reasonable price. In response to the closing of dining halls during winter and summer breaks, university staff
members purchase one meal each day for any remaining students. Live-in professionals and nearby faculty also invite students into their home for holidays meals and provide ways for students to traverse the city. Beyond providing housing to those without, maintaining open halls during breaks has also led to a greater number of students pursuing Maymester or J-term courses, and in turn, graduating on track.

Duquesne University and Loyola University Chicago changed a portion of their financial policies to better cater to the needs of students. Duquesne operates under the philosophy that if students are able to commit to attending by way of registering for future courses, they are more likely to actually attend. In the past, students were unable to register for the next semester’s courses if they had a $1,000 outstanding balance in their account. That policy prevented nearly 500 students from registering for courses at the end of a given semester. The institution recently changed the acceptable outstanding balance amount to $1,350. As a result, the number of students who were unable to commit to future attendance each semester dropped from 500 to 300. Duquesne’s philosophy has indeed left a positive mark on campus; the more students that have committed to attending, the higher the retention and graduation rates have been. Finally, at Loyola University Chicago, students petitioned for a financial policy change that would support their undocumented students. Every student now pays an addition $2.50 fee as part of their tuition that goes to supporting scholarships for undocumented students. These scholarships allow undocumented students to not only afford initial admittance costs but also maintain healthy loan balances as a continually enrolled student.

Summary. By acknowledging the effects of policies on student retention, these institutions have identified that it is not enough to solely consider the objective, visible operations on campus; it is equally important to address the covert, internal structures, policies,
and organization of an institution. Policies are the actualization of the values and assumptions that guide an institution. Therefore, if they are not created with an eye for student success and retention, it will impede the accomplishments of offices and programs that are striving to focusing on these issues. As Marquette looks to improve their overall retention, these findings remind administrators, faculty, and staff to dig deeply and refine old as well as create new institutional policies.

**Conclusion**

Increasing retention and graduation rates must be a widespread effort that occurs across all departments within both academic and student affairs. The best practice institutions successfully developed ways to provide cross-campus support to students through partnerships between departments. The more we can establish student success as a shared vision across both academic and student affairs departments, the better we will be able to align resources and provide the necessary support for students to persist through their collegiate experience.

If Marquette University has the goal of decreasing the number of students making decisions to depart, resources must be allocated to impact various phases in this decision making process, including the separation, transition, and integration phases, all of which were addressed through the best practice findings. Moving forward, we plan to integrate what we have learned from the annotated bibliography and the findings from our best practice research into informing the Office of the Provost about where these resources should be allocated in order to have the greatest impact on retention and graduation at Marquette.
References


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