

**Grounded Retention Strategies:
Maximizing the Success of Your Student Retention Efforts**

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College student departure continues to plague colleges and universities. Although some departure is healthy for both the student and the institution, unnecessary departure looms problematic to both the college student experience and to institutional financial resources.

Recent theoretical developments offer two organizational attributes that are posited to play an important role in student departure decisions in both residential and commuter colleges and universities. These attributes have the potential to reduce unnecessary student departure. In our in our ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report titled Understanding and Reducing College Student Departure (2004), Amy Hirschy, Shederick McClendon and I describe these two organizational attributes. These two attributes or characteristics are: *Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare* and *Institutional Integrity*. Both of these organizational attributes are empirically grounded in research.

1. Commitment of the Institution to Student Welfare. This notion manifests itself as an institution's abiding concern for the growth and development of its students. An institution committed to the welfare of its students also clearly communicates the high value it places on students in groups as well as individuals. The equal treatment of students and respect for them as individuals constitute additional aspects of this construct. This construct parallels Joseph Hermanowicz's concept of "enforced success." He derived this concept from case studies of four highly selective research universities that vary in their retention rates. The university with the highest retention rate has what Hermanowicz terms a culture of enforced success. In such a culture all students are treated as if they are at-risk. Key people believe in the promise of each student in a fervently held way.

2. Institutional Integrity. *Institutional Integrity* is defined as the extent to which a college or university is true to its espoused mission and goals. Institutional integrity demonstrates itself when the actions of a college or university's administrators, faculty and staff are compatible with the mission and goals proclaimed by a given college or university. Students

who perceive that their institution is committed to their welfare are less likely to depart. Likewise, students who perceive that their institution embodies institutional integrity are less likely to depart.

Figures 3.1 and 3.2 describe the role these two organizational attributes place in student departure. I will not describe these figures, but you should note that the influence of both of these attributes on departure decisions is postulated as being indirect.

Strategies Derived from These Two Organizational Attributes

Because these attributes embody the cultural values of a college or university, their day-to-day enactment requires little or no direct financial costs. The strategies I put forth today take the form of eight imperatives for college and university administrators and staff to follow in the performance of their organizational roles. These imperatives arise from and reinforce an institution's commitment to the welfare of its students and its institutional integrity. Consequently, college and university administrators, faculty and staff who follow these imperatives contribute to their college or university's efforts to reduce student departure.

These imperatives are as follows:

1. Administrators, faculty, staff members and clerical workers should embrace a commitment to safeguarding the welfare of students as clients of the institution. Such a commitment entails the communication to students that they are highly valued members of the campus community.

2. In the day-to-day administration of institutional policies and procedures, administrators, faculty members, staff members and clerical works should treat students equally and fairly. Favoritism toward some students and not other should not occur.

3. A respect for each student as an individual should manifest itself in the day-to-day interactions college and university administrators have with students. In particular, staff members and clerical workers in the registrar's office, the financial aid office, student counseling, student accounts, residential life and other offices that have frequent contact with students should display such respect.

4. College and university administrators should assure that institutional policies and procedures coincide with the mission,

goals and values espoused by their college or university. Policies and practices incongruent with the mission, goals and values of the institution must be either discontinued or modified in a way that supports the mission, goals or values of the institution. New policies and procedures must also support the mission, goals and values of the college or university.

5. The day-to-day actions of college and university administrators, staff members and clerical works should support the mission, goals and values of the institution. Those actions observed by students should, in particular, support institutional goals and values.

6. The reward structure for administrators, staff members and clerical workers should recognize those individuals who highly value students, treat students equally, and demonstrate respect for students as individuals in their day-to-day work. Individuals whose actions are congruent with the mission and goals of the institution should also be recognized. Such behaviors should receive appropriate weight in the allocation of such institutional rewards as annual reappointment, promotion and annual salary increases. However, individuals who do not demonstrate a commitment to student welfare, treat students disrespectfully and unequally and act in ways that undermine the mission, goals and values of the institution should be counseled to show significant improvement.

7. Institutional publications and documents should communicate, when appropriate, the college or university's abiding concern for the growth and development of its students. The contents of the institutional publications and documents should also support the mission, goals and values espoused by the college or university. In particular, view books, catalogues and other materials used in the recruitment of students should receive careful scrutiny to assure that the college or university portrays itself accurately to prospective students.

8. Public speeches made by the president, chief academic officer, chief student affairs officer, academic deans and admissions officers should communicate the high value their college or university places on students as members of the academic community. Such speeches should also resonate with the mission, goals and values of the college or university. College and university administrators, staff members and clerical works who follow these eight imperatives in their day-to-day work provide students with opportunities to observe the reinforcement of the core organizational values of commitment of the institution to the welfare of its students and institutional integrity.

Adherence to the eight imperatives by college and university administrators, staff members and clerical workers contributes to institutional efforts to reduce college student departure. Steadfast adherence to these eight imperatives also fosters the success of programs and activities designed by the institution to reduce student departure. Moreover, observance of the eight imperatives requires little or no direct institutional cost. Enactment of these imperatives, however, requires considerable expenditure of effort on a daily basis by individual college and university administrators, staff members and clerical works. To assure the expenditure of such daily individual effort, the president, chief academic officer, chief student affairs officer and chief admissions officer should also embrace and follow these eight imperatives.

Thank you for this opportunity to share these strategies with you.

References

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