Proactive Retention through Integrated Modeling of Engagement (PRIME)

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Abstract

This study engages readers in a dialogue on redesigning retention strategies from reactive to proactive, a conceptualization of interdependencies of retention intervention metrics and student behaviors, and identifies the actions needed to achieve them in practice through real-time collaborative campus partnerships. Best practices for data collection and analysis, including anticipated impacts on specific workflows and student support services, are discussed through a multi-pronged and multi-phased approach to allow for predictive modeling. While this study explores model development for Kean University, a four-year public university in New Jersey, it has implications for replication at other institutions to increase persistence, retention, and timely graduation.
One of the most frequently asked questions on college campuses nationwide is, “What is the one thing we should do to increase student engagement and success on our campus?” The answer is to provide all students with authentic and meaningful learning experiences through which they can develop connections to the campus community, thus fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance amongst the student body of a college or university. But how? When a student arrives on a college campus on the first day of their freshman year, they arrive with a variety of predetermined attributes, some of which are inherent, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Some they acquire, such as prior academic preparation and knowledge regarding the higher education experience while others evolve such as study methods and behaviors. In addition, the student brings with them a range of external factors, including family and work responsibilities, as well as individual sets of goals and aspirations that are personal to their unique vision of the future. Much like students, each institution also has its specific attributes that are inherent to the distinctive culture of that individual institution. For example, colleges and universities have characteristics based upon the size of the student body,
location, delineation between public or private, financial resources, and student-to-faculty ratio, among other contributing factors (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Nevertheless, all entering college freshmen value the importance of a college education and are capable of succeeding when provided the right resources and guidance.

The aforementioned attributes of both incoming students and the institutions that they choose for academic study have one thing in common: they are constant and unchangeable. Therefore, these attributes must be taken into consideration to develop a framework for student success as they form and guide each student’s retention behaviors. What can be changed then is the level of commitment that the institution has regarding student success, as well as the institutional climate and the opportunities for engagement that are offered to its students (i.e. to influence students’ academic success behaviors). According to Harper and Quaye (2008), student engagement is characterized as “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes” (p. 2). Although this definition describes engagement as solely student-driven through voluntary participation, the institution cannot expect students to engage themselves; rather, the college or university must provide its students educationally purposeful experiences that make them feel connected to the campus and encourage them to engage in such experiences.
As the single most significant predictor of persistence, engagement opportunities for students—including services such as intrusive academic advising, discipline-specific tutoring, supplemental instruction in traditionally difficult courses, writing assistance across the curriculum, public speaking preparation, career exploration, leadership, and personal development and mentoring—are critical factors in fostering a retention-focused campus from the first semester through graduation. Students must be held to high standards for success, while, at the same time, being provided the academic and social support systems and opportunities that are built with their success in mind. This concept aligns with Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Student Departure in that students leave because of struggles with academics, social engagement, and commitment. Therefore, it is the responsibility of institutions to create intentional models of engaging students through high-impact, data-driven activities and cutting-edge initiatives, particularly during their first year to establish preferred self-created student retention behaviors to increase student success.

While the general body of retention literature addresses the correlation between the use of academic support services and persistence, this paper presents an intentional study of collaborative and data-driven interventions implemented at a four-year public university that foster integrated interactions and investments to make proactive retention engagements for student success. This
paper also fills a void in the current research by outlining specific steps taken in moving the study from concept to practice through proactive and predictive modeling for replication at other institutions.

**Institutional Context**

Kean University is a four-year, public institution in Union, New Jersey, with satellite campuses in Toms River, New Jersey; Sussex, New Jersey; and Wenzhou, China. Kean serves over 15,000 students in 50 programs of study, 40% of whom are first-generation and nearly half who are Pell-eligible. With an 82% acceptance rate, Kean’s institutional mission is grounded in access to higher education, and the institution prides itself on having the lowest tuition of all comprehensive New Jersey state universities. Kean was ranked one of the top five diverse campuses in the nation by Diversity, Inc., and in 2019, US News and World Report named Kean a top performer on social mobility among the top universities in the northern United States for helping economically disadvantaged students enroll and graduate within six years. It is important to keep this context in mind when discussing proactive retention interventions for students at Kean University.

Trends in first-to-second year retention at Kean University over the past six years have, for the most part, hovered between 72 to 76 percent, maintaining the status quo with the national average for “like” institutions (71.2%), those with the same Carnegie
Classification and a similar acceptance rate (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). While we are meeting the status quo, we know we need to do better for our students. Yet, the fall 2017 entering freshman cohort saw the lowest first-to-second-year retention rate than any other cohorts in the previous five years, representing a five percent drop from the previous year and demonstrating a need to prioritize retention on campus. That same year, a Presidential Task Force on Retention was established, resulting in the creation of the Office of Student Success and Retention (OSSR) in 2018 within the Division of Strategic Initiatives in the President’s Office. A Director of Student Success and Retention was hired to lead that office, and the proactive initiatives implemented in that first academic year have contributed to a nearly two percent increase in retention for the fall 2018 cohort.

According to Tinto and Pusser (2006), “institutional commitment is more than just words, more than just mission statements issued in elaborate brochures; it is the willingness of the institution to invest resources and provide the incentives and rewards needed to enhance student success” (p. 6). Kean University has proven its investment in student success through the establishment of OSSR and the funding of new, proactive retention initiatives; however, all higher education professionals at Kean know that retention is everyone’s job on campus as demonstrated by the University’s Vision-2020 Strategic Plans. While the establishment of OSSR speaks
to the overarching institutional focus on retention, the success of its initiatives lies in collaborative partnerships with other campus units, such as the Learning Commons (LC), which houses the University’s academic support services and spearheads other retention efforts within the campus community.

**Proactive Retention Strategies**

One of the first goals of OSSR at Kean University was to redefine “early” in terms of early intervention and, in the words of Ruffalo Noel Levitz founders, “give students what they need before they know they need it.” Thus, the proactive retention strategies implemented through OSSR from 2018 to present fall into three categories: some are designed as early interventions before students even starting their first semester at Kean; others support all Kean students from the first semester until timely graduation; and there are also unique programs specific to targeted populations, such as students on academic probation or transfer students. These phased strategies acknowledge “one size does not fit all” and the complexity of retention processes as related to student demographics and circumstances as mentioned previously.

**Freshman Retention Initiatives**

The earliest data-driven retention intervention Kean integrates into the student’s college journey is the College Student Inventory, part of the Retention Management System *Plus* platform from Ruffalo Noel Levitz, the leading provider of technology-enabled
solutions for higher education. The College Student Inventory, or CSI, is a non-cognitive assessment of freshman motivators for success that is taken by all freshmen at New Student Orientation (occurring several weeks and up to two months) before the start of the fall semester. The CSI measures indicators related to academic motivation, general coping, and receptivity to support services among others, providing pre-enrollment data that otherwise is not accessible to institutions. Such data on student retention behaviors is important, as nearly 25% of students’ academic success is determined by non-academic characteristics (Bloom, 1976). Kean reached a 97.2% response rate during the first year of implementation, and student reports were integrated into their Transition to Kean course (first-year seminar, administered through the General Studies Program), freshman advising, support service outreach, and campus programming. Also, the top ten needs of all incoming freshmen are shared with the entire campus community for holistic considerations relative to course preparation and delivery. For the past two cohorts, nearly half of the top ten list has centered on requests for career-focused support.

As a follow-up to the CSI, the Mid-Year Student Assessment, or MYSA, was also implemented with the entering fall 2019 freshman cohort during the second half of the fall semester with an 81% response rate. In addition to continued measures of motivation, the MYSA identifies students’ plans to transfer in the subsequent
semester or year. OSSR found that 88% of freshmen planned to complete their degree at Kean and conducted targeted outreach to the 12% indicating desire to transfer. MYSA student reports are also shared with major advisors in spring for second-year advising to identify changes in students’ academic and social needs and concerns, providing a springboard for mid-year action planning and follow-up.

Another freshman retention initiative implemented through OSSR at Kean University is 1st Gen Scholars, a mentoring program that pairs first-generation freshmen with Kean alumni. While navigating the first year of college is challenging for anyone, first-generation college students often face additional challenges. Though eager to help their children succeed, families of first-generation college students are unable to share firsthand experiences or offer advice regarding the transition to university life or the academic behaviors necessary for retention. An additional layer of support during this transition is in the form of a mentor who has experience navigating both the college and professional worlds and who assists incoming first-generation students in finding success at Kean University. Data indicated that 1st Gen Scholars finished their first year with a 15% higher cumulative GPA than their non-participating first-generation peers, and 97% of 1st Gen Scholars were retained the subsequent semester (as compared to 88% of their peers).
First Year and Beyond

A new and updated advising and constituent relationship management platform, Ellucian CRM Advise, was implemented at Kean in fall 2019 to unify faculty and staff visibility into student performance to provide greater team integration. Advise identifies student risk level and prioritizes early alerts; automates targeted communication plans using live data (e.g. GPA, course registration, program participation, academic early alerts and registration holds); incorporates CSI data for first-year student success scores, and supports all retention programming. The platform effectively provides a dashboard-like dataset and experience for student support program providers that help to manage and direct retention efforts across the campus community. While Advise provides a platform for the integration of such services, the effectiveness of the system is reliant on the strategic identification of data from which it pulls.

In its first year, more than 400 faculty and staff trained in Advise, and over 10,000 individualized emails went to students related to advising, registration, internship opportunities, academic support services, and other Kean resources. Further, more than 2,000 students have engaged with the Advise Student Experience, which allows students to access their success teams, composed of academic advisors and support staff (including financial aid counselors, career counselors, athletics coaches, academic coaches, and
representatives from support service areas, among others) at the university as well as raise their alerts to connect with resources. This information, along with the shared tracking functionalities given the data ingest of Advise, gives OSSR and LC the capacity to monitor, analyze, and respond quickly to students’ needs during their semester experience – and document their behaviors.

As the college years are a critical period for students’ growth, institutions of higher education have extended learning outside of the classroom to enrich the overall college experience (Logue, Hutchens, & Hector, 2005). For this reason, OSSR has also launched a virtual, co-curricular guided path through Campus Labs designed to promote active student engagement with the ultimate goal of timely graduation and a successful career. As a unique achievement challenge, the Cougar Climb highlights six unique domains including Academic Engagement, Career Development, Health and Wellness, Social Engagement, Civic Engagement, and Global and Cultural Awareness. Students can complete tasks, monitor progress, and set co-curricular goals. The pathway assists students by tracking their progress as they move through each domain to Cougar Climb completion. Two hundred freshmen completed more than 60% of the Cougar Climb in its first year, and 90% of top path completers finished above a 2.5 GPA with the highest completers entered into a raffle for a free semester of tuition. The Cougar Climb
is rolling out an Upperclassman Experience Path for the 2020-2021 academic year to continue this momentum.

Retention literature is replete with studies that show how undergraduate success in higher education is often dependent on a student’s performance in gateway courses—or those required entry-level classes that provide the academic foundations for selected majors. To respond to the need for additional support in the most challenging gateway courses at Kean, a Supplemental Instruction (SI) program was implemented by the OSSR as a pilot in general chemistry in fall 2018. The SI program at Kean has since grown to support students in General Chemistry, Organic Chemistry, Pre-Calculus, Computer Science, and History through funding from two grants: a $1.5 million USDOE Strengthening Institutions Grant (in collaboration with the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs) and a $1.7 million National Science Foundation Grant, both awarded in 2019. As a non-traditional form of academic assistance that targets historically difficult gateway courses (those with a high ratio of D/F grades and withdrawals), SI provides embedded class support in the form of a peer SI Leader.

Peer-facilitated academic assistance programs have a long tradition in higher education and have proven successful in promoting student success (Ning & Downing, 2010). Student leaders “effectively serve as a bridge between course “experts” with extensive content knowledge and the lived experience of the
student body,” thus truly functioning as facilitators of learning rather than sources of knowledge (Sloan, Davila, & Malbon, 2013, p. 86). In a peer-facilitated learning environment, students work collaboratively to solve problems and there is greater opportunity for learner involvement. Further, learners are more likely to engage with one another due to the less threatening nature of the peer-facilitated teaching discourse; this increased motivation results in students contributing to their knowledge while simultaneously benefiting from the knowledge of others (Ning & Downing, 2010). Through the organic mentorship that occurs through peer-facilitated collaborative learning, students may also benefit by gaining a sense of belonging on campus. These are in direct support of and promote key student retention behaviors that are fundamental to student success.

**Targeted Interventions**

In addition to intentional outreach to target student populations through calling campaigns, automated early alerts, and Advise communications, OSSR also houses interventions and programming specific to transfer students, rising sophomores, and students on academic probation. Like the CSI for freshmen, the Second-Year Student Assessment, or SYSA, identifies motivations for students with previous college experience and integrates with transfer student orientation and transfer transition courses to allow for greater understanding of Kean transfer students’ needs. In addition,
the Office sponsored an inaugural Learn, Earn, and Persist (LEAP) Scholarship—a retention micro-grant based on merit and financial need for rising sophomores. Recipients are assigned a giveback project on campus under the advisement of a Kean staff member in return for a $1,000 institutional tuition grant to foster persistence. One-hundred percent of the 77 participants in the LEAP pilot program were retained.

While it is necessary to move the needle from reactive to proactive in terms of retention to best identify and meet students’ needs, every institution must still support those students who fell through the cracks despite all of these efforts. Therefore, the only initiative that predates OSSR at Kean University (and is the only reactive retention initiative) is the Step-It-Up program, which provides one-on-one academic coaching and weekly success workshops for students on academic probation (less than a 2.0 cumulative GPA). The Step-it-Up program, then, as a reactive retention initiative, exemplifies how institutions must meet students where they are and guide them toward the path of academic success and timely graduation. However, to be most effective, institutions must redefine “early” in terms of strategic retention initiatives and make continued progress in developing more proactive measures to engage students even before they arrive on campus.
Learning Commons Resources and Student Support Services

Comparable to OSSR’s retention interventions, the Nancy Thompson Learning Commons (LC) is a Vision-2020 initiative designed to transform the traditional library experiences of a student by recognizing the need for a digital data and information delivery system that combines library resources, databases, and academic support services seamlessly. This includes support of student success through workshops and programs linked with Writing, Public Speaking, and Tutoring services. Within the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, the LC was begun in the summer of 2017 to transform the student experience of an information delivery system of resources (e.g., peer literature, databases, and Open Educational Resources) while incorporating fundamental academic support in the areas of writing, public speaking, and tutoring – provided to students by students. The LC provides an engagement zone for students to assist, guide, and encourage them to view their academic success as a combination of these elements.

The role of the LC is to be a “Center of Campus” entity, literally and figuratively, that offers spaces in which students may coalesce their college experiences in which classes, social time, and extracurricular activities intertwine. The LC administratively then serves as a conduit and structure that facilitates and tracks Student Support Services and coordinates the same among the broader
campus community. This structure considers the fact that learning is a process and so is the support that students need to succeed at a university. We thus consider “what we do, how we do, and why we do” in the context of students seeking to complete their field of study, and how student retention behaviors are intertwined. This includes a supporting infrastructure that relies on the effective, efficient, and timely use of spaces, resources, services, and the accessibility and quality of the same — and which provides a means to level the playing field. As such, the LC expects its peer tutors who engage directly with students to obtain Certification (CRLA) to ensure best practices and to be certain that they are attentive to individual student needs. At the same time, we monitor the support workflows—not to micro-manage those providing the support, but to promote the most effective service that meets each student’s needs.

Aside from one-on-one support, the LC offers group sessions as appropriate and sponsors a wide variety of programming. While our mantra has been to provide all students with “what they need” when, where, and how they “need or want” to receive support through any platform or interface; it is clear that in the Covid-19 era these are even more critical in continuing student support services remotely. They also clearly distinguish the purposes of students seeking LC support services: remedial (learning in uncertainty), reminder (skills practice), and growth (professional development).
At the core of LC engagement are the key Student Support Services of Writing, Public Speaking, and Tutoring. These are fundamentals that tie-in with the much broader Kean Community and require that we engender our interaction and engagement for the enhancement of academic aspects of the student experience. In short, the LC makes support services relevant, timely, and interconnected with the student experience. To do this means being available to students as often as possible and in as many ways as possible as students expect to “access us” not only in workshops but also in their classes and whenever they drop-in for help (whether in-person or virtually). We provide students the in-house tools they need (for example, Grammarly—an English language digital writing tool that offers grammar and spell checking as well as plagiarism detection) throughout our facility (and online), to ensure that all students have access to the academic workspace and tools they need to be successful.

While the LC services are distinct, aspects of them are incomplete if not embedded in and cross-marketed within the University Community. For example, presentation skills in Public Speaking tie directly with writing/communications skills that also have a visual component and rely upon reading comprehension. That means that the LC must provide an interface that is informed, supported, and driven by both academic and non-academic units that relate to students’ retention behaviors — and their courses and majors. For
example, the LC offers information literacy training through a Blackboard LEARN module (created by the library faculty) in a collaborative partnership with the General Studies Program through its General Education courses. The online modules provide fundamentals relevant to research and creative works as tied to primary and secondary sources, which are associated with each student’s field of study.

A Comprehensive & Collaborative Framework for Student Success

The concerted retention efforts facilitated by both OSSR and LC at Kean University exemplify an active relationship in providing support services and engaging events that foster flexibility to continue to evolve robustly, both meeting students’ needs and meeting students where they are. Within the lens of this collaborative framework, retention is not the primary metric but “more accurately viewed as a by-product of what matters much more—student learning and success” (Felten, Gardner, Schroeder, Lambert, & Barefoot, 2016, p. 171). In connecting the missions of both OSSR and LC, and that essence of engagement, we can better describe what effective student learning looks like and align the collaborative vision to improved, timely, effective, and efficient processes and procedures, all of which contribute to increased retention, as evidenced in the example that follows.
A simple fall-to-fall comparison of incoming freshman student cohorts revealed that nine of every ten students not retained one year later—and who did not make use of student support services of any kind (through OSSR or LC) left the university with a probationary GPA (below 2.0), indicating that they did not or were not engaged for success. In contrast, one of every ten students retained after completing their first year of college—who had made use of at least one student support service during their first year—achieved a GPA twice that of their cohort peers.

These results suggest that integrated and overarching community engagement, as expected and verified in the body of literature, clearly makes a difference. They also necessitate a deeper dive into the data and tracking of student cohorts for better understanding the specific metrics (and combinations) that might be available to help reveal and define student engagement and student retention behaviors. The strength of this approach here is to examine multiple measures and variables involved in retention and in defining the term “student success” aside from obvious student demographic information. In other words, we must make use of the entire landscape, particularly given the wide diversity of student needs and circumstances encountered in today’s student populations, to make strides toward proactive retention through integrated modeling of engagement, or PRIME, as the title of the proposed model suggests.
Moving Toward *PRIME*

The initial analysis of the impact of support services usage on cumulative GPA is just a small piece of the retention puzzle. Yet that catalyzed a much larger study that begs the following question: If we were able to determine a need for support for one small population of Kean freshmen, what can we do with a deeper dive of analyzing and interpreting additional data in context? The answer: Build an institutional predictive model of characteristics and behaviors of students most likely or least likely to be retained in their second year. The puzzle before us seems so straightforward when looking retrospectively at numbers and information, but then why doesn’t it work for every student, or why aren’t the retention numbers changing from year to year if we are always changing and adjusting our approach? In other words, while these data and metadata add to our analysis, provide context, and allow for interpretation of retention, they also speak to specific intervention strategies, student engagements through service support units, and student retention behaviors.

While the literature is replete with specifics of retention variables and case studies, there are only the hints or glimpses of “clues” that tie behaviors, support services, workflows, and processes together—including those across community-driven inputs—in a comprehensive manner. What that means is that, if we intend to truly attempt modeling of retention interventions and their impacts,
the study’s guiding questions must be multi-pronged and considered in a phased examination. This is essential to move from basic diagnostics and baselines to predictive modeling if the intention is to harvest the benefits of the multitude of data collected not only for student cohort groups but also across all groupings of students. If we are truly to understand the connections between support and responses, we must acknowledge the steps along the way and the multi-perspective parameters that give different points of view.

This includes performing analyses that point in the same direction as the overarching goals for student intervention success and making analyses that have the functionality and capacity to identify and point to specific behaviors, interventions, and support workflows as delivered by OSSR and LC. Together these would prove not only success in meeting the needs of students but more simply, and perhaps more importantly, would justify to program administrators and staff the worth of our combined efforts for student success. It would give evidence that the programs they facilitate do indeed make a difference to an otherwise unassisted student.

Thus the guiding questions given here focus on the development of a generalized function that is not purely empirical, one that allows the discernment of efficacies of service approaches and engagements, and one that offers more than circumstantial evidence
that such programs and services make a difference for student success. The essence of such efforts must be guided by modeling that seeks to engineer and implement the solutions needed for student success—and that creates a model that is robust enough to allow corrective actions and real-time evolution of services and interventions during a semester, from term to term, and across or between student cohorts.

Therefore, the development of a predictive and proactive model for retention intervention, such as PRIME, and one that expresses student retention behaviors must exist within a phased sequence approach. That is a process that first makes use of statistical information and student data to provide specific empirical foundations known to be relevant to retention that are consistent with the body of literature and supported by the institutional data and metadata. The first phase of the approach accomplishes a diagnostic understanding of the unique population at-hand, at any time, and allows appropriate action implementation, but that does not “fit” the larger population over time or circumstance. It reveals a sample distribution from the larger population of interest to establish a baseline.

The second phase seeks to identify what is happening on a finer scale and how various actions and reactions comprise student success, retention, and associated behaviors. This phase explores interactions, correlations, and suggests specific cause-and-effect as
well as the relevance of sequences in intervention strategies and outcomes; it represents the interactive and auto-regressive aspects of retention (i.e. how does a student’s behavior change with time with or without intervention) and the metrics often used to quantify student success. The second phase is about defining metrics and data sources to conceptualize the model diagnostics to a predictive framework. This entails categorizing data and, in addition to visits to support services, intentionally including demographics, academic performance, registration, and non-cognitive aspects, and putting it all together in one comprehensive and dynamic database.

Continuing this intentional drill-down of data can also determine, among other pre-enrollment factors, if the program into which students are admitted has any correlation with retention, particularly for those students admitted into conditional or specialized programs. Of all Kean University students who were not retained (who also did not seek out any support services), conditionally admitted students make up 17%. This is significant given the small number of students in the conditional freshman cohort, thus indicating we need to do more to support the students who we already know are coming to us more academically underprepared.

While this second phase leads to aggregate reporting and annual assessments to “close the loop” in evaluating the effectiveness of student support services, multivariate functions are required with a
refined knowledge of the variance encountered within and among the samples and populations of students if they are to be more useful in both planning and delivery of student support. For these reasons a third phase that speaks directly to interventions and student retention behaviors is needed and is designed to capture the students’ own experiences during their first year at college in their own words and as self-reported.

To collect this data, a survey was designed and distributed to all students from the previously identified freshmen cohorts. It was followed up with the facilitation of focus groups for those students retained and interviews for those not retained to identify the collective experience of the students, building it into a comprehensive database with the goal of data convergence. In other words, the third phase yields an opportunity to tie quantitative and qualitative information connected to real workflows and interventions by OSSR and LC. Taken together these elements essentially create the “physical” or “practical” working model that ties the empirical evidence to best practices, interventions, and behaviors, and these then define and help us to understand retention intervention impacts and student behaviors in context.

The fourth phase of this modeling approach, prediction, drives individual and group interventions at any time independent of the student body, semester, time within a semester, or as a function of both prior and ongoing student support services and outcomes or
experiences. For example, an outcome often of interest is the ability to examine the role of technology, or the effectiveness of program events, or placement of staff and resources. In any of these, the return on investment is relevant to managing and anticipating resource needs for student support and in ensuring that the proper personnel and that specific types of interventions are available, accessible, and appropriate for student success through key intervention retention strategies.

Systemic, planned analyses of all data points to determine predictive characteristics of students more likely to be retained versus more likely to not be retained should recur on an annual basis with ongoing engineering of solutions. Predictive characteristics will also change over time as the cohorts’ needs change; therefore, the nature of the PRIME model is the continued identification of areas for further analysis, which provides for its evolution over time.

Conclusion

Our focus in designing and implementing PRIME at Kean University has been to consider proactive interventions and the understanding of student behaviors relative to both operational and administrative workflows that are in place at most two- and four-year institutions. This intent provides for potential replication (not duplication) that addresses unique challenges faced by any institution and that allows steps guided by the holistic and
overarching retention process. In addition, the best design, driven by associated infrastructures and organizational profile, ties workflows and employees to students and in turn links to stakeholders, according to cross-unit collaborations and partnerships. Retention is certainly everyone’s job at an institution and can be data-driven in an effective, efficient, and timely manner.

Indeed, the “big picture” of retention connects the broader definition of “student success” to specific metrics that are quantitative, qualitative, cognitive, non-cognitive, and interdependent. How these elements form components of the “machinery” of retention at an institution itself is the appeal of the PRIME approach – and which affords portability for replication. The data and metrics that drive the process-based retention impacts consider the intervention, the student, the process, the evolution, and the outcome as part of the process. Selection, storage, use, and concatenation or synthesis and derivation of data then are paramount to creating meaningful analyses that avoid findings that represent artifacts of the tools themselves, which individually may be inflexible (or incapable of measuring certain characteristics). This approach also identifies opportunities for improvement of student support services and/or their delivery and the modalities offered to students relative to students’ dynamic needs or wants.

We believe that with proper attention to design, the “parts” of institutions dedicated to retention efforts, even if differing
substantially from one institution to another or from a four-year to a two-year and from public to private, can yield a cohesive practical model that has flexibility for adjustment and that is robust for the institution. The model inherently bases itself upon known and anticipated resources as well as aids in identifying clear strengths and weaknesses in any of the retention processes occurring across campus. At the same time, the model approach points to what data to capture, when, and where to do so, and how such data can lead the desired retention outcomes as part of component processes and workflows. It naturally identifies data creation needs without being merely a statistical, demographic, or theoretical model for diagnostic purposes alone.

Naturally, the PRIME approach advocated here benefits from strategic initiatives that focus on student retention and academic success. It also benefits from incentives to the campus community to support holistic and collaborative methods, data sharing, and data automation and digitization. These do not preclude the personal touch in retention work; they focus it by allowing the practitioner to innovate rather than process and track students in a strictly formulaic manner. It gives feedback that can effect change—even amid a semester (or pandemic).

For example, we knew we needed to hit pause as soon as we discovered the void in services for our conditionally admitted students. Therefore, we piloted a summer bridge program and a
more intentional advisement model for the fall 2020 cohort. Similarly, we have taken a more collaborative approach to academic support services through the implementation of collective professional development programming (by OSSR and LC) for tutors and SI leaders, as well as the creation of more streamlined and strategic communications through Ellucian CRM Advise. Incorporating these principles has led our design of PRIME and allowed both planned and unexpected results and outcomes in real-time that have proven critical to improving workflows that change, enhance, and improve retention intervention to evolve student retention behaviors as part of their personal growth and professional development.

References


