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## Faculty must play a bigger role in student retention and success (opinion)

**Another way to determine the disciplinary perspective of an article is to look at the author's background. Look at the end of the article to find out about the author.**

Submitted by Carl J. Strikwerda on September 4, 2019 - 3:00am

The biggest challenge that America faces in higher education is graduating more of our students. Providing access to education is a major issue, but if students fail to finish, they can't gain the value of a postsecondary degree.

Nor can the United States remain competitive as a nation in the global economy. We once led the world in the percentage of college graduates in the adult population. Depending on which measure is used, we now rank as low as 19th. The decline is not because we send fewer young people to college than other nations do. The gap comes from our failure to graduate students, even after six years.

Why is this the case? For a large portion of young people, it's because they don't make adequate progress toward their degree. The United States has more than 3,000 four-year colleges and universities. The American Talent Initiative, using IPEDS data, has found <sup>[1]</sup> that fewer than 300 of these institutions graduate at least 70 percent of their students within six years. Nationwide, only 59 percent of students graduate within six years. If we add in community colleges, the largest single sector within American higher education, the picture is more troubling still. Only 14 percent of community college students who

say that they plan to get a four-year degree actually obtain one within six years of beginning community college.

The failure to have more students graduate is a human and financial tragedy. From the human perspective, it leaves millions of families with less of an opportunity to advance economically, embitters them toward society as a whole and dashes the dreams of young people for a better life. The financial implications are equally troubling. Millions of students leave college with loans that are all the more difficult to pay because they lack a degree to earn a higher income.

In fact, the student loan crisis is disproportionately a crisis for those without degrees. The likelihood of default is actually in inverse correlation to the size of the debt [2]. Almost one in four of those with less than \$5,000 in student debt are in default, while only 7 percent of those with more than \$40,000 in student debt are in default. Meanwhile, colleges and universities collectively spend billions on students who do not graduate while still having to spend more to recruit, advise and teach new students to take their place.

On top of that, the students who suffer from this defeat are disproportionately those who can least afford a setback. The correlation between those who succeed or fail in college and students' family income is a close fit, even after controlling for test scores and high school grades. The higher the income of the parents, the likelier students will find a way to graduate. The lower the family income, all things considered, the more likely they will not.

Many of the students failing to graduate clearly have the intelligence and desire to succeed. True, many fail due to personal issues, finances, prior educational gaps or family problems. Too often, however, we in higher education have failed them. Advising, financial aid counseling, student support systems and campus climates all have to play critical roles in order to help students graduate.

## The Most Direct Way

Even more important, the research and money being poured into helping improve retention often doesn't flow to those who are crucial to student success: the faculty and department chairs, program directors, and deans who shape faculty culture. Faculty members are often the most direct way to help at-risk students.

Colleges and universities reach out to at-risk students in myriad ways, with registrars, advising centers and financial aid offices all playing important roles. Yet students may decide to ignore such efforts. By contrast, if students do not show up for class and turn in their work, failure is guaranteed. No matter what else colleges and universities do for students, success in the classroom is essential.

In the last analysis, then, it is instructors who control their fate. Colleges and universities can often do more, at less cost, to help at-risk students by concentrating on how to reach them most effectively in their academic work than by other means, as important as they may be.

Departmental culture, therefore, is also crucial to students graduating. Even at colleges and universities with low graduation rates, there are bright examples of departmental success. Conversely, at the three institutions where I worked over the last 20 years, all of which had admirable retention rates, the variance among departments could be striking. Some departments retained as many as 90 percent of their first-year students into the sophomore year, while others retained as few as 60 percent.

The best indicator, furthermore, is not retention in a department itself, given that as many as 30 percent of bachelor's degree students switch majors [3] at least once in the first three years, and 9 percent change more than once. The best indicator is whether or not students leaving a major also leave the institution as

a whole and fail to graduate. The engineering department at one college made a major contribution to the college's overall retention by quickly advising students who were failing about other possible majors. Rather than leaving the college, more of those students changed majors and graduated.

Far too little information exists on how to help academic departments ensure that students succeed, in spite of the obstacles that they face. What I have learned from my experience and the internal institutional data that I have worked with are the following:

- **Individual instructors -- especially in the first semester and first year -- make a huge difference.** If colleges are willing to collect data at a more granular level, it almost always reveals that certain professors have learned how to reach at-risk students effectively and teach them skills to survive at the college. Other instructors can, and should, learn from them.
- **Introductory courses are crucial make-or-break arenas.** Special care must be taken in developing curricula and creating opportunities in these courses for tutoring, office hours and study-skills sessions.
- **A slow ramp beats a deep dive.** At-risk students perform better if they take the most difficult courses at a measured pace, rather than a demanding load in the first semester. Departments with lower retention rates can consider redesigning their curricula and adding ways for at-risk students to catch up.
- **It's important to share relevant information widely.** Many instructors, academic departments, department chairs and deans lack information on their role in retention and graduation. They typically would be happy to help their institutions do better in retention and graduation, but they don't have the data, examples of best practices or incentives to change their cultures. Providing such data and clear incentives, and sharing the best practices from the most successful faculty and departments, can make a major impact.
- **Non-tenure-track faculty members and adjuncts are essential partners.** Often, they teach the majority of first-year students. Many are experts at reaching at-risk students. They can share their insights with other instructors and benefit from more support and training on how to help improve retention.
- **Collaborative efforts pay off.** Culture eats strategy, if not for breakfast, as Peter Drucker may or may not have said, then at least by the time of the midmorning coffee break. By fostering a culture

of collaboration, departments can rally around the goal of retention and make a difference on their own, even if money, a strategic plan or leadership from above are absent.

At one university where I consulted, a department and the dean were at loggerheads over the department's insistence on running its own internal advising center for first-year and sophomore students. The duplication in effort and money seemed unwarranted. Then I talked to the department chair. She pointed out that her department had one of the highest retention rates, even controlling for students' background and preparation. She explained that the university advising center too often treated all courses, instructors and class schedules as the same. "With students at risk," she said, "we know that we have to steer them to certain instructors, certain classes and schedules, or we won't see them back in a year." Other departments that I've worked with at institutions large and small have revamped their first-year curricula so that at-risk students take an easier initial load, are monitored carefully and then helped to catch up or advised on other majors if they don't do well.

The goal for a department should be to help students do their best and keep them at the university, even if they switch majors. Too often, innovative departments are islands of success. They have helped at-risk students stay and graduate because a chair, veteran faculty member or dean created a culture where retention is a common goal.

Research, funding and leadership at the level of the university are essential if we are to change the trajectory of failure for millions of students. But just as important will be grassroots efforts -- supported by presidents, accrediting bodies and foundations -- to build a culture of success department by department. Making a change could help millions of students and their families, contribute to economic opportunity, burnish higher education's reputation, and restore a bit of faith in the American dream.

**Author Bio:**

**The author's background is in higher education so this supports that the disciplinary perspective is education. It would also be helpful to know the degree he had earned.**

*Carl J. Strikwerda is a former president of Elizabethtown College, dean of arts and sciences at the College of William and Mary, and associate dean at the University of Kansas.*

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#### **Links**

[1] <https://americantalentinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/American-Talent-Initiative-2018-Impact-Report.pdf>

[2] <https://trends.collegeboard.org/student-aid/figures-tables/share-defaulters-and-three-year-default-rates-loan-balance>

[3] <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018434.pdf>