Reframing Retention Strategy for Institutional Improvement

David H. Kalsbeek
EDITOR

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1. Framing Retention for Institutional Improvement: A 4 Ps Framework
   David H. Kalsbeek
   This chapter introduces a 4 Ps framework for student retention strategies—profile, progress, process, and promise. This framework provides a comprehensive approach to focusing retention research and strategies in ways that can improve institutional retention and completion rates.

2. Reframing Retention Strategy: A Focus on Profile
   David H. Kalsbeek, Brian Zucker
   The first “P” within a 4 Ps framework of student retention—profile—recognizes that an institution’s retention and graduation rates are highly predictable, largely a function of the institutional and student profile, and are more a function of what the institution is rather than what it does.

3. Reframing Retention Strategy: A Focus on Progress
   Brian Spittle
   The second “P” within a 4 Ps framework of student retention—progress—focuses on ensuring that students are making satisfactory academic progress, rather than just persisting, toward degree completion.

4. Reframing Retention Strategy: A Focus on Process
   Charles C. Schroeder
   The third “P” within a 4 Ps framework of student retention—process—gives priority attention to institutional processes and policies that either help or hinder the continuous enrollment of all students, not just students defined as “at risk.”

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   David H. Kalsbeek
   The fourth “P” within a 4 Ps framework of student retention—promise—connects retention strategies with institutional brand strategies so that marketing and retention become mutually reinforcing.
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   Carla M. Cortes
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7. Process and Progress in Action: Examples of What Works
   Charles C. Schroeder
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   George D. Kuh
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9. Engaging Faculty in Retention: Finding Traction through Accreditation
   Caryn Chaden
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    David H. Kalsbeek
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Do we really need another publication on student retention in American higher education? When one looks at the many angles at which the current literature examines the subject, where does this volume fit in and what does it have to offer?

- Theoretical approaches to student attrition and persistence abound; there is little need for more conceptual models—so this volume doesn’t attempt that, although it does build on these foundations.

- What works in terms of programs and interventions that impact student retention has been well documented; while this volume is not focused on yet again describing exemplary initiatives designed to help students persist and graduate, it does cite some practical and proven approaches.

- The critical societal need to improve student degree attainment has been made powerfully clear; although this volume doesn’t add to those calls to action, it is a response to them.

- The merits in broadening the retention discussion to embrace student success and student learning have been thoroughly explored; while this volume affirms these educational outcomes, it warns how expanding the retention agenda beyond institutional rates of degree completion can distract efforts to improve these rates.

- Data summaries on rates of retention and degree completion are voluminous and accessible; this volume does not reiterate such data, but it is informed by this research.

- The growing complexity of the environmental context for retention—including the inadequate national data, the impact of poor K–12 education, shifts in federal and state policy, increasingly diverse student populations, and the swirl of students between postsecondary institutions—has already been described; although this volume acknowledges this context, it does not attempt to elaborate on these complicating factors.

- The natural variations in retention challenges and strategies across sectors of higher education institutions have been discussed; while this volume doesn’t speak to the distinct and differential realities facing two-year institutions, for-profit institutions, small liberal arts colleges, and large research universities, it does attempt an ambitious argument that transcends these differences.

In the midst of the exhaustive collection of work that already exists on student retention, this volume goes in a new direction by addressing the difficulty in gaining traction at the institutional level in improving student retention and degree completion—especially at larger four-year institutions where size, complexity, and diversity of structures and processes present
particular challenges. Although there is an obvious need for national, state-wide, and systemwide attention to the social and economic imperatives of improving rates of degree completion and levels of postsecondary attainment, the individual institution is where the proverbial rubber meets the road, and that is the focus of this volume.

The premise is simple and grounded in Senge’s (1990) admonition that organizations are what they are because of how we think about them. The way many institutions approach the retention task is hampered and hobbled by a number of traditional and prevailing inclinations, predispositions, and assumptions—or what Senge refers to as the “mental models” that dictate how we perceive the challenges we face, the problems we must fix, what we consider to be relevant information about them, and the responses that we orchestrate. This volume is about helping institutions better focus their time, energy, and resources in their retention efforts by reframing the way they think about it.

This volume is organized into two main sections. In the first section, chapter 1 introduces a framework for thinking about student retention—the 4 Ps of retention: profile, progress, process, and promise. Each of these is explored in chapters 2 through 5. The second section of this volume, chapters 6, 7, and 8, explore applications of the 4 Ps concepts by giving examples of how institutions have implemented institutional improvements that can be seen through a 4 Ps lens. Chapter 9 then argues the value that new accreditation requirements offer in getting faculty engaged in the retention effort. Chapter 10 concludes the volume by offering some themes and practical observations on using the 4 Ps framework.

The 4 Ps framework has been developed by a close group of colleagues at DePaul University charged with leading the institution’s retention agenda. This book, like those institutional change efforts, has been a truly collaborative effort. The framework and this exposition of it are the result of our thinking and working together over many years. Brian Spittle, Caryn Chaden, and Carla M. Cortes have all worked diligently with me, not only on their own contributions to this volume but also to each other’s and to the entirety of the work. At my request, Charles C. Schroeder and George D. Kuh brought decades of valuable experience and practical insight to this text. My own understanding of the importance of market profile stems from years of working and learning with Brian Zucker of Human Capital Research; chapter 5 on promise was likewise shaped by years of learning about brand marketing from Verna Donovan of Donovan Consulting, who also contributed content for the chapter. To all of these colleagues, I am most grateful not only for their commitment and contribution to this volume but also for their collegiality that constantly challenged and extended our thinking and our learning together.
Finally, this volume would never have reached completion without the diligence of Sandra Chaplin, who has taken a cacophonous assortment of chapters and shaped them into something coherent—while also ensuring it was done well and done on time. Her many talents are reflected on each and every page and are gratefully acknowledged.

Reference


*DAVID H. KALSBEEK* is the senior vice president for the Division of Enrollment Management and Marketing at DePaul University.
This chapter introduces a 4 Ps framework for student retention strategies—profile, progress, process, and promise. This framework provides a comprehensive approach to focusing retention research and strategies in ways that can improve institutional retention and completion rates.

Framing Retention for Institutional Improvement: A 4 Ps Framework

David H. Kalsbeek

There appear to be few topics in higher education so extensively examined as student retention (Seidman 2012). At the institutional level, countless strategic plans have focused on it, countless task forces and committees have convened to address it, countless statewide or systemwide reports have analyzed it, and most campuses are awash in data about it. Scholars have studied it, journals and conferences are dedicated to it, and consultancies specializing in it abound. And an ever-growing chorus of policy and legislative groups calling for greater accountability in higher education has singled out retention and completion rates as essential measures of institutional success. With the advent of the Obama administration’s calls to action to increase rates of degree completion and levels of baccalaureate attainment to achieve global competitiveness, the national dialogue about retention and student success has taken on a greater intensity.

However, amid this abundance of attention and apparent richness of information, there are persistent cries at the institutional level about the scarcity of usable and actionable knowledge, understanding, or insight. There seem to be few examples of institutions that have successfully improved their overall rates of degree completion by any substantial margin. Improving graduation rates at the institutional level seems to be among the most intractable of institutional challenges in higher education.

Why is that? Peter Senge (1990) reminds us that many of the most bedeviling problems organizations face are the result of the prevailing mental models used to define and understand organizations in the first place. His work suggests that one may find the cause for this intractability at the institutional level within the prevailing perspectives and the dominant mental models that guide retention research and practice. How retention is framed and the language used to do so shape how the problem is defined,
how solutions are envisioned, and how institutions respond; if those responses prove to be inadequate, perhaps it is the way the challenge was framed in the first place that is in part at fault.

A 4 Ps framework for student retention strategy is a construct for reframing the retention discussion in a way that enables institutional improvement by challenging some conventional wisdom and prevailing perspectives that have characterized retention strategy for years. It opens new possibilities for action and improvement by suggesting that institutions embrace the following concepts:

- Graduation rates are institutional attributes as much as they are institutional accomplishments and are largely a function of institutional and student profile.
- Insofar as degree completion is the outcome of successfully meeting the academic requirements of a curriculum, academic progress is at the core of retention strategy.
- Just as a rising tide lifts all boats, improving broad processes that affect the greatest number of students is the optimal institutional focus.
- Focusing on those student outcomes that are integrally a part of the institution’s core purposes and brand promise brings reciprocal benefits to the institution as much as to the students.

**Lessons from Typical University**

A hypothetical institution, Typical University (TU), can illustrate the perspectives on retention often exhibited at colleges and universities. The precipitating problem at TU is this: Graduation rates are lower than somebody thinks they should be. That somebody may be the president, the provost, the board of trustees or regents, a strategic planning committee, or a faculty council; perhaps an external accrediting or bond-rating agency assessment precipitated the concern. Regardless, there is a charge to study and improve the institution’s retention and graduation rates. In response to that charge, TU, like most institutions, has assembled a retention task force.

The retention task force at TU is most likely composed of faculty; student affairs professionals; academic administrators responsible for support services, such as advising; and some representatives of enrollment services, such as financial aid. Their perspectives on retention naturally stem from their respective roles and responsibilities at the institution, roles that are oriented to the needs of individual students and their successes and failures. It is typically a highly individualized, student-centered approach that will orient the task force to begin its work in this way:

- The TU task force will compile retention and graduation rates at peer or comparable institutions, rank those comparative institutions in terms of those rates, place TU’s institutional performance in that comparative
context, and proceed to review what institutions with higher rates are doing right and, by implication, what institutions with lower rates are doing wrong. The task force, in other words, will begin its work from a premise that institutional retention and completion rates are primarily the outcome of institutional effort and investment, reflect the efficacy of a retention strategy, and measure an institution's achievement.

- The TU task force will in all likelihood realize from its initial analysis that the bulk of its undergraduate attrition occurs in or at the end of the freshman year, and that finding would be consistent with its review of the existing literature (Seidman 2012; Tinto 2012). Task force members will then focus their attention on improving first- to second-year persistence. The TU task force will in all likelihood also engage in an extensive study of the characteristics of students who consistently demonstrate a retention or graduation rate that is far below that of the institutional average. Once that small group of “high-risk” students is defined, TU will focus attention and resources on improving the likelihood of that population’s persistence.

- Finally, the TU task force will assert that “Retention and graduation rates themselves aren’t the goal—it’s about student success.” Or perhaps, “Retention and graduation rates are the outcomes of ensuring students’ academic and social integration, involvement, or engagement.” The task force will draw these insights, too, from the existing literature and theoretical models (Astin 1985, 1999; Bean 1985; Kuh 2007; Tinto 1975, 1987). Its agenda will expand to embrace what at least seem to be broader and bolder objectives and aspirations. The TU task force will seek to improve student satisfaction and student learning in order to improve retention. It will then rename itself the Student Success Task Force.

These actions, taken to improve institutional retention and degree completion rates, are reflective of some of the prevailing perspectives, mental models, and core assumptions about retention widely held by higher education professionals. They likely seem familiar to anyone who has served on a campus retention committee. They are also illustrative of why TU and the institutions it exemplifies struggle to gain traction in improving the institution’s degree completion rates—which was the task force’s initial explicit charge.

Retention and graduation rates, like any other enrollment management goal, are broad enrollment measures to be assessed and addressed as institutional attributes and outcomes. Yet typically the retention task force at hypothetical TU does not address these rates as population metrics to be modeled, measured, and managed in the full context of other institutional metrics and enrollment dynamics; task force members have an individualized, student-centered, and interventionist orientation—not an institutional one. To use a health care analogy, TU’s committee approaches its task