

Enhancing Student Retention

James Racchini • Frostburg State University

STUDENT RETENTION IS the process an institution or program uses to maintain its enrollment. Tinto¹ described a number of modes of student departure. *Institutional departure* describes the student who leaves a university to transfer to another institution. Students who leave school altogether and never return to that school (institutional departure) or another institution (system departure) are commonly termed dropouts. “Stop-outs” are students who temporarily leave the school or system but eventually return to their former school or another school to resume taking classes. Both dropout and stop-out can be voluntary (students who leave to work, deciding they do not like school) or involuntary (poor academic performance, financial aid problems). Regardless of the reason for departure, the end result is a loss of students, some of whom might have held great potential.

The purpose of this column is to review contemporary retention theory and identify practical strategies specific to improving retention in athletic training education programs (ATEPs).

Student-Retention Concerns

Reducing student attrition and improving retention in institutions of higher education is a major concern of administrators and faculty. In the general student population, research has shown a 56% dropout rate of students in 4-year institutions.¹ There has been a substantial amount of research investigating this phenomenon in the general student body, but very little has been written about allied health-care programs, let alone ATEPs. Recent athletic training education reform has forced many programs to restructure their curriculums and rethink pedagogy. Despite all the challenges, the priority of educators must never be overlooked—meet-

ing the needs of the students. Of particular concern are the demands of freshmen.² Between 1995 and 1998, 15.5% of first-time freshmen (18 years old or younger) left school and did not return to complete their program. This statistic illustrates the need to address retention issues as early as possible, regardless of a student's program of study. There are numerous factors that affect students' decisions to stay or to leave the postsecondary institutions in which they enroll (see the sidebar).

Factors Affecting Retention

One of the most cited theories of student retention is Vincent Tinto's schema for dropout from college.³ Developed from Durkheim's theory of suicide, the schema makes comparisons between committing suicide and leaving school because of a lack of integration into a social structure. Individuals who do not feel they are part of the social system in college will not develop a high level of institutional commitment and are prone to voluntary dropout. Nonvoluntary dropout, student dismissal for poor academic performance, might also be indirectly affected by a lack of integration into the social or academic culture of the institution. Ensuring that students can experience all that college has to offer personally, educationally, and socially should be a priority of all educators who are sincerely interested in the well-being of their students.

Students enter college with different family backgrounds, individual attributes, and precollege school experiences. The combination and interaction of these traits is what develops the student's goal and institutional commitments. Goal commitment comprises the student's educational plans, educational expectations, and career expectations. Tinto suggests that with all individual characteristics being equal, goal commitment will lead to optimal levels of grade performance

Factors Affecting Student Retention

- Failure to develop social relationships
- Lack of acceptance into social structure
- No feeling of commitment to the institution
- Poor academic performance
- Unpleasant experience early in college career
- Financial difficulty
- Family issues
- Underdeveloped academic goals
- Absence of quality interactions with faculty and peers

Note. Adapted from Tinto¹ and Astin.⁵

and intellectual development. Furthermore, his theory implies that the more committed students are to their plan of study the easier it is for them to integrate themselves into college life.

Institutional commitment is a measure of how important attending a certain school is to a student. Research has shown that students who feel more integrated into a college's culture are more likely to stay at that school.⁴ Quality interactions with peers and faculty are what lead to a positive social integration into college. Faculty who seek out-of-class contact with their students and attempt to get to know students personally are more likely to ease the transition process of starting college.

Experiences, social or academic, that students have during their first year at school will lead to reevaluation of their goal and institutional commitments. A student whose early experiences are positive is less likely to leave school. To increase retention rates, many institutions use orientation classes and learning communities during the freshman year.

External factors can also influence a student's decision whether or not to remain in school. Social and economic factors outside of the college structure could adversely affect goal and institutional commitment. The considerable time demands that the clinical-education component of ATEPs poses can present a challenge to a student who needs to work a part-time job to pay for college expenses. Flexibility with a student's time is vital to avoid discouraging potentially good students from giving up on athletic training before they have had a chance to become immersed in the curriculum.

Another key factor in student retention is student involvement.⁵ Student involvement is "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience."^{5(p297)} The more energy a student devotes to academic and social pursuits on campus, the more persistent he or she will be with staying in school. Students in ATEPs invest vast amounts of energy into the didactic and clinical components of the curriculum and therefore might have an advantage over other students in becoming committed to their field of study.

Improving Student Retention

In order to keep the best and brightest in our programs, program directors should appreciate the importance of cultural diversity in the curriculum, help guide students in formulating career goals, promote healthy relationships, encourage active learning, and be flexible in regard to extracurricular activities (Table 1).

From an academic standpoint, the more actively involved students are in their education, the more energy they invest in it. Classes that promote active learning and critical thinking are more likely to promote increased energy investment than are purely lecture-oriented classes. Critical thinking and practical application of knowledge in athletic training should be priorities because of the nature of the profession. Furthermore, Astin's theory⁵ suggests that keeping a good balance between passive (lecture-oriented classes) and active learning will promote student involvement and thus help athletic training students invest more energy in their coursework.

Including learning communities during the first year of a curriculum is one effective way to create an early positive academic experience.⁶ Because most ATEPs place general education or liberal arts courses early in the curriculum, the development of a learning community linking those courses together would be an ideal way to improve student retention before they actually begin to take core courses in the major. For example, if students must take courses in English composition, statistics, and health and wellness, instructors of those courses could work together to develop a coordinated academic plan around a common theme. Each instructor could assess research projects in different areas: composition and grammar by the English instructor, use of statistics by the math instructor, and health content by the health instructor.

TABLE 1. STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE STUDENT RETENTION

Concept	Strategies
Appreciate cultural diversity.	Promote cross-cultural communication skills. Increase awareness of attitudes toward diverse groups. Increase knowledge regarding traditional and nontraditional minority populations. Encourage elective coursework in diverse disciplines. Structure clinical experiences to maximize student exposure to diverse populations.
Develop career goals.	Incorporate goal or professional-philosophy statements in program entrance requirements or early class assignments.
Promote healthy relationships.	Make a point to meet with new students early during their first semester on campus. Develop a peer mentorship program.
Create an interactive classroom.	Appreciate student differences in learning styles and preferences. Incorporate assignments stressing problem solving, critical thinking, and student collaboration. Use reflective writing exercises in didactic and clinical courses.
Encourage campus involvement.	Stress the quality of clinical experiences over quantitative measures to allow students access to campus activities.

Note. Concepts from Martin and Buxton⁷ and Fritz.⁸

In regard to social activities, the more formal activities students are involved with on campus, the more energy they invest in the college social structure. Students living in residence halls, working on-campus jobs, or participating in extracurricular activities invest more energy than do commuters with off-campus employment. As Astin⁵ points out, however, the amount of energy that a student has is finite, and too much time spent on social activities can detract from academic pursuits.

Summary

As we are educators, the growth and development of our students should be our number one priority. In today's educational setting, it is easy to get caught up in addressing and attaining various standards, competencies, and proficiencies. We must spend time with students outside the didactic setting, however. In addition to the knowledge that they accrue, the quality of our students' college experience will ultimately be measured in terms of experiences had and relationships developed both in and outside of the classroom. To retain students with high potential to contribute to the athletic training profession, we must get them involved early in their educational pursuits, appreciate the diversity they bring to our programs, help them develop their goals, and be flexible with

clinical schedules so they can get involved with various campus activities. Today's students are the future of our profession. If athletic training is to continue to grow in stature in the health-care community, as educators we must provide a nurturing environment in which our future stars can thrive and develop into tomorrow's leaders in the field. ■

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James Racchini is the director of the athletic training education program and instructor in the Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation at Frostburg State University. He is also currently a doctoral student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.