Student Retention and Success Units: Structure, Responsibilities, and Staffing

Custom Research Brief

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I. Research Methodology

Project Challenge Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

Structure of Retention Efforts
- How do other institutions organize retention efforts? Do they maintain dedicated offices, committees, or other structures?
- If so, what offices or committees with dedicated responsibility for student retention exist at other universities? What is the organizational structure of these units? Who leads these units and to whom do they report? What are the primary activities of retention units at other institutions?
- If no dedicated office oversees or coordinates retention efforts, how do other institutions coordinate activities across an institution? How are responsibilities determined and how do administrators ensure effective communication across relevant units?

Staffing and Resource Allocation
- Do institutions employ dedicated staff members explicitly responsible for retention? What are their job titles and duties? What are the salary levels of dedicated retention staff (if available)?
- What financial resources are required for retention programs and activities? What are the major expenses of dedicated student retention units at institutions that operate them?

Assessment
- How have unit practices or programs appreciably impacted retention outcomes? How have administrators evaluated the return on investment of their practices relative to necessary resources (e.g., budget, personnel, staff time)?
- If other universities have recently reorganized or transitioned models, what advantages and disadvantages did administrators find in the previous and new models? What lessons were learned in the process?

Project Sources The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- Advisory Board’s internal and online research libraries (www.educationadvisoryboard.com)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (http://nces.ed.gov)
The Forum interviewed leaders of student retention related units at public universities.

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Approximate Institutional Enrollment (Undergraduate/Total)</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>23,000/28,000</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
<td>20,000/33,000</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
<td>6,000/8000</td>
<td>Doctoral/Research University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>25,000/33,000</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>28,000/36,000</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University F</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
<td>22,300/30,000</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
II. Executive Overview

Key Findings

Units dedicated to student success and retention vary substantially across profiled institutions. Contacts typically attribute staffing, activities, and budgetary resources to university-specific context regarding leadership priorities and organizational structure. However, review of numerous retention units and research conversations reveal two models:

- **Combination of several smaller units into a single larger division**: At University 3, a dean leads the newly-created Undergraduate Studies Division, which includes all academic and student services that directly contribute to student retention. At University B, the Dean of Student Retention is seeking to integrate several student service delivery and academic advising units into a single department while maintaining institution-wide responsibility for student success initiatives.

- **Highly-focused units offering signature services and programs or serving specific populations**: At other profiled universities, student success or student retention units each offer a distinctive portfolio of services and programs that grew organically to meet institution-specific deficits and student needs. For example, the Center for Learning and Student Success at University A first began offering tutoring because it was not offered elsewhere on campus.

Student retention units report to academic affairs at five of six profiled universities. Contacts across profiled institutions emphasize that provostial sponsorship and support is critical to unit effectiveness.

Unit responsibilities vary across campuses, but the most common programs and services offered include academic advisement for undeclared, exploring, or transfer populations; management of early warning or student intervention systems; and provision of tutoring or supplemental instruction. In addition, retention units across profiled institutions support the development of an institutional student success agenda through committee leadership, surveys and studies conducted in partnership with institutional research, and internal advocacy for policy changes.

The largest budgetary expenses for profiled units at all institutions are full-time staff salaries, undergraduate and graduate student staff salaries, and miscellaneous program expenses, in that order. With the exception of the Undergraduate Studies division at University D, which employs at least 27 full-time staff members across several distinct units, other profiled units employ between two and sixteen staff members.

At least three of six profiled universities receive substantial grants from the Department of Education to fund retention programming. An annual $375,000 federal TRIO grant subsidizes the Student Support Services department at University D, which offers academic assistance for low-income, first-generation, and disabled students; the university must reapply every five years for the competitive award. University A and University E also received grant funding for their proposed retention efforts from the Department of Education’s Title III “Strengthening Institutions” program.

While most institutions have experienced gains in year-to-year student retention over the last five years and perform regular assessment of unit offerings to determine program impact, contacts are not able to directly attribute unit activities to institutional retention and graduation rates. Over any multi-year time period, universities may experience changes in student demographics, admitted student profile, program requirements, and even facilities (e.g., housing and other student amenities) that simultaneously contribute to retention.
III. Structure and Organization

Dedicated Retention Units

Retention Units Vary across Institutions

Despite a national focus on student success and retention, the College Board finds that fewer than 15 percent of four-year research-oriented institutions employ a single employee with a sole focus on managing retention initiatives; retention is more commonly considered an institutional imperative that requires the collaboration of university faculty and staff across divisions. Moreover, even fewer universities host robust offices dedicated to student retention. Across universities, these units vary greatly in size, structure, and responsibilities.

Contacts suggest that the vast majority of conventional academic and student support services contribute to student retention directly or indirectly. However, to identify the units profiled in this report, EAB selected units that include “student success” or “student retention” in the unit title or prominently in the unit mission statement.

Structure of Retention Units at Profiled Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Unit Name</th>
<th>Unit Leader</th>
<th>Unit Reporting Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>Center for Learning And Student Success</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Dean, Office of Undergraduate Studies, who reports to the Provost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Student Academic Affairs, Advising and Retention (SAAAR)</td>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, who reports to the Provost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Office of Student Success and Retention</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Assistant Provost, who reports to the Provost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>Student Support Services (SSS)</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Director of the University College Learning Center, who reports to the Executive Director of University College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>Division of Undergraduate Studies</td>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>Provost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University F</td>
<td>Office for Student Success and Retention Programs</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Assistant Vice President of Student Success, who reports to Vice President of Student Affairs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Considerations for Naming a Student Retention Office

Contacts at University A explain that a campus visit by renowned retention scholar Dr. Vincent Tinto convinced administrators to change the name of the Office of Student Retention to the Center for Learning and Student Success. Contacts explain that while “retention” may signal purpose to higher education professionals, it appears foreboding to students who connotate retention with K-12 grade repetition or may otherwise regard it as negative.

Sponsorship of Academic Affairs Reportedly Critical to Unit Effectiveness

Contacts across profiled institutions emphasize the importance of academic affairs partnerships in developing a successful retention unit. Five profiled units are organized within the academic affairs organization.

University F’s Office for Student Success and Retention Programs currently reports to the Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs; however, contacts explain the unit only became able to affect institutional policy after a Director of Assessment and Retention was appointed in academic affairs and instructed to collaborate with the student affairs retention unit. Contacts at University E, who hold retention leadership positions at multiple universities, predicts that a student affairs retention unit without dual reporting to academic affairs would struggle to gain credibility among faculty.

Benefits of Retention Staff Reporting to Academic Affairs Offices

Enhanced respect among deans and department chairs

Because many activities of student retention offices, such as coordinating student intervention or early warning systems, require the cooperation of faculty and course instructors, it is critical that student retention offices gain the support of academic unit leaders.

Ease of access to key stakeholders and data

Contacts explain that the units whose missions most closely impact retention (e.g., academic advising) are located within academic affairs, as are the units whose resources student retention units must access to measure and track student success (e.g., institutional research, registrar).

Ability to influence policy

Contacts explain that many faculty would not give credence to the recommendations of a student affairs unit regarding academic policy. Two profiled retention units leveraged their academic affairs reporting line to establish a freshman forgiveness policy.

Reliance upon Provost for resources or enforcement

The Provost may be willing to expedite bureaucratic processes or marshal additional resources to the retention office because student success measures are key performance metrics. Contacts at University F cite the explicit support of the Provost as a factor that allowed the university to develop an early warning system in just three months.
Units Execute Conventional Academic Support Services, Manage Student Intervention Systems, and Manage Other Retention Initiatives

Dedicated student retention units execute a number of programs and services across profiled institutions, including many typically offered though different units at other universities.

Responsibilities and Programs of Dedicated Retention Units Across Profiled Institutions, Listed in Order from Most Frequently Offered among Profiled Institutions to Least Frequent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Details and Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guide Institutional Agenda Regarding Retention</td>
<td>Retention leaders across profiled institutions participate in or chair university-wide committees on retention and student success that evaluate the institution’s progress on retention and develop future goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner with Institutional Research and Assessment</td>
<td>Contacts describe institutional research (IR) as a key partner to student retention units; all retention unit leaders collaborate with IR staff to generate customized reports on student persistence and conduct outcomes-based assessment of retention programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer Advising to Undeclared, Exploring, and/or Transfer Students</td>
<td>Multiple retention units host academic advising services for students that have not yet selected a major, have been rejected from limited-capacity majors, or have recently transferred to the institution. SAAAR at University B also employs a Pre-Health Advisor who specializes in programs to advise students seeking pre-health professions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage Early Warning and Student Intervention Systems</td>
<td>Most student retention units operate an early warning and/or student intervention system, such as a mid-quarter grade notifications through Banner, an attitudinal survey and follow-up from staff based on specific concerns, a commercially available survey such as ENGAGE, or implementation of MAP-Works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinate Services for Special Populations</td>
<td>The Undergraduate Studies division at University E includes the Office of Disability Accommodation, while SAAAR at University B partners with the veterans affairs office and LGBTQ services on various initiatives. University D’s Student Support Services offers services to qualifying first-generation, low-income, and/or disabled students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer Individual-Student Counseling, Guidance, and Coaching</td>
<td>While staff at all profiled institutions receive assistance requests from individual student, several offer structured and tailored programs. University F, for example, conducts biweekly student success coaching appointments with about 40 students per semester.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oversee Students in Poor Academic Standing</td>
<td>University A enrolls students with grade-point averages under a 2.0 in a structured and intrusive academic support program. University F operates the Mid-Year Academy, mandatory for students on academic probation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Multiple student retention units oversee tutoring and supplemental instruction for the most common first-year courses, including course sequences in math, science, statistics, composition, and others that tend to host high drop, failure, and withdrawal rates.

Student retention units coordinate both residential and course cohort-based learning communities at University E and University A.

The student retention unit at University F conducts over one dozen workshops and seminars on topics such as classroom success, time management, and study skills; in addition to scheduled times, staff will present as requested to classes and organizations.

University C executes college-specific campaigns to remind students to file for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Contacts at University D report that financial aid education sessions are among the most popular workshop topics.

University A has recently hired an advisor to serve the 4,000 students that enroll in online courses; he will create educational materials on success in online classes and also work one-on-one with students who approach him for assistance. Contacts at University B are considering the addition of distance learning support to their retention unit’s services.

University C recently won a federal grant to conduct a comprehensive reenrollment and senior completion program for departed students.

Student retention units at private institutions often provide emergency financial aid (e.g., The Director of the Office of Student Success and Retention at Xavier University can authorize microloans up to $1000 to retain students), but this function does not occur at any profiled institutions, which are all public institutions.

Retention
Committees

Committees Guide Institutional Agenda and Advocate Policy Change

According to the College Board, about 75 percent of four-year institutions maintain an institutional retention committee; student retention units contribute to these committees in a number of ways. At some institutions, student retention unit leaders chair or co-chair the student retention committee; for example, the Dean of the Division of Undergraduate Studies at University E co-chairs the committee along with the Vice President for Student Affairs. When not directly leading the committee, student retention staff support committee work through facilitation of research in partnership with IR and tracking identified student success metrics for presentation to the committee.

Student Retention Units Cannot Shoulder All Responsibilities for Implementing Retention Committee’s Recommendations

Contacts report that committee members typically expect that student retention unit leaders will bear responsibility for implementation of all committee recommendations regarding student success. While committee approval may provide student retention staff with the institutional mandate to pursue a policy or action, contacts explain this is not ideal or possible due to a number of reasons:

- Student retention offices lack the staff capacity or financial resources to implement all possible committee recommendations.
- The student retention office may not be the ideal sponsor for certain new programs or services. For example, a proposal regarding reform of academic advising may be best implemented within college advising units.
- Assumptions that the student retention director will execute all committee recommendations promotes unwise institutional expectations that he or she is responsible for all student success initiatives; instead, student retention must be an enterprise imperative of all staff and faculty.

Contacts explain that it is more reasonable to expect that a student retention unit leader will follow up with other unit leaders to remind them of their obligations to the committee’s approved plans or assist in overall coordination of recommendation implementation.

Strategies to Maximize Retention Committee Effectiveness:

Assign leadership to senior administrators

Include representatives from all relevant units

Ideal committee co-chairs are senior executives from both academic affairs (e.g., vice provost, dean of undergraduate education) and student affairs (e.g., dean of students, assistant or associate vice president of student affairs).

All units that may contribute to retention initiatives and planning should receive representation on the committee. Common represented units include enrollment services units such as the registrar, bursar, and financial aid; student affairs unit such as orientation, housing, health services, counseling; and academic affairs units such as academic advising. Faculty should receive representation via senate representatives or a department chair.


Meet regularly and briefly

EAB research finds that high-functioning committees tend to meet bi-weekly or monthly, and meetings last no longer than one and a half hours.

Develop agenda of both special and standing items

Once the committee has approved a long-term retention strategy and specific recommendations, unit representatives should discuss progress on action items at each meeting, while also discussing new items nominated by the Provost or senior leadership for discussion. Enrollment management or IR staff brief committee members on highly recent data sharing trends in course enrollment, withdrawals, and drops, including variance across academic units and student populations.

IV. Resource Allocation

Staffing Typical Retention Units Employ between Two to Sixteen Staff Due to Variance in Breadth of Responsibilities

Differences across profiled retention units in scope of programing account for variance in staff levels.

Staffing Levels Across Profiled Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Unit Title</th>
<th>Full-time staff</th>
<th>Student staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University A</td>
<td>Center for Learning And Student Success</td>
<td>Six full-time staff</td>
<td>Four graduate assistants and 60 undergraduate student tutors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Student Academic Affairs, Advising and Retention (SAAAR)</td>
<td>16 full-time staff</td>
<td>Information Unavailable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Office of Student Success and Retention</td>
<td>Fourteen staff (multiple positions may not be full-time)</td>
<td>Information Unavailable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>Student Support Services (SSS)</td>
<td>Five full-time staff</td>
<td>About 30 undergraduate peer advisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University F</td>
<td>Office for Student Success and Retention Programs</td>
<td>Two full-time staff</td>
<td>Six graduate assistants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Undergraduate Studies Division at University E is not directly comparable to the above units because it contains several distinct smaller units. The Division is led by three senior staff (Dean, Associate Dean, and Assistant Dean). It includes at least 24 other full-time staff across the following units: Office for Exploring Majors (seven staff), Office of Disability Accommodation (seven staff), Learning Center (six staff), and the Success Initiative (four staff).
Graduate Students and High-Ability Undergraduates Provide Academic Assistance

Employment of graduate employees: University F employs six graduate students to serve as Student Success Coaches who meet one-on-one with students to increase motivation and discuss learning effectiveness strategies. University A employs four graduate assistants, one each dedicated to learning communities, supplemental instruction, face-to-face tutoring, and eTutoring.

Employment of undergraduate employees: Student retention unit leaders extend their scarce budgetary resources by employing student employees to perform several responsibilities. University D and University A both employ undergraduates to serve as tutors for courses in which they excelled academically; University B maintains a corps of peer advisors who assist with department programming, instruction of first-year seminars, and several other responsibilities.

Select Profiles of Organizational Structures

Office for Student Success and Retention Programs at University F
(Two full-time staff)

- Director

- Coordinator for Tutoring

- Six Student Success Coaches (graduate assistants)

Center for Learning and Student Success at University A
(Six full-time staff)

- Director

- Associate Director, Learning Communities

- Coordinator, Learning Communities

- Coordinator, Academic Success

- Office Assistant

- eLearning Success Advisor

Contacts at University A estimate that the total expense of staff salaries is about $275,000 annually.
Student Academic Affairs, Advising, and Retention at University B
(Sixteen full-time staff)

Dean

Assistant Dean, Transition Resource Center
Oversees four additional staff, including two associate directors, one assistant director, and one office manager

Retention Specialist

Pre-Health Advisor

Assistant Dean, Academic Advising & Transfer Center
Oversees seven staff, including one associate director, one coordinator, one office manager, and four advisors

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Retention Coordinators at University C

The Office of Student Success and Retention at University C maintains a decentralized organizational structure that the Director believes is unique among retention units. While all retention staff are employed by central academic affairs, eight retention coordinators are each assigned to work with the student body of a particular college or school.

Retention coordinators assigned to academic unit: Retention coordinators spend the majority of their time implementing the same key programs across colleges (e.g., student intervention and advising on academic probation), tailoring to local student bodies as necessary; a fraction of their time is dedicated to college-specific retention projects in collaboration with the dean or unit head. The Director works as a liaison between her staff and IR, requesting student reports on various criteria (such as failing mid-quarter grades) and dividing names among the relevant retention coordinators.

Central staff perform non-targeted services: In addition, five full-time staff work centrally in Student Success and Retention to execute university-wide initiatives (e.g., production of a parents newsletter, administering placement tests).
Budgeting **Salaries and Wages Comprise Greatest Proportion of Unit Budgets**

Staff salaries comprise the highest expense across all student retention units. While position details vary across institutions, College and University Professional Association for Human Resources surveys find the following median salaries for related positions (not entry-level):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Doctoral Institution</th>
<th>Master’s Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Director of Learning Resources Center</td>
<td>$81,498</td>
<td>$57,448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Academic Advising</td>
<td>$76,440</td>
<td>$62,371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advisor/Counselor</td>
<td>$40,814</td>
<td>$40,211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinator of Academic Support Center</td>
<td>$50,396</td>
<td>$46,461</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student worker wages is the second-highest expense across initiatives. Undergraduate student workers typically earn between $8 and $10 per hour across profiled institutions. Retention units often also employ graduate students from fields such as education, counseling, and social work; they work either under the terms of a graduate assistantship or as a salaried employee. At University F, graduate students earn a nine-month stipend of $12,000.

**Other Expenses Include Signature Initiatives and Other Program Expenses**

Student retention directors describe several other programming expenses:

- **University F** maintains an operating budget of $25,000 to finance programming; this is typically spent on supplies with unit branding, pizza, buses for events, and other minimal costs. However, the director occasionally receives authorization to redirect as much as 40 percent of these funds to supplement staff pay.

- Contacts at **University B** report their largest expense beyond salaries is the installation of MAP-Works software, which costs about $50,000.

- **University D** must spend 10 percent of their total federal grant on need-based scholarships for program participants, approximately $37,500.

**Department of Education Funding Available for Many Retention Programs**

Several institutions have received grants to support student success programs:

- Student Support Services at **University D** receives $375,000 each year from a federal TRIO grant, which funds academic assistance for low-income, first-generation, and disabled students; the university must reapply every five years for the competitive award.

- **University A** and **University E** also received grant funding for their proposed retention strategies from the Department of Education’s Title III “Strengthening Institutions” program.
V. Evaluation of Retention Initiatives

**Program** Unit Directors Conduct Outcomes-Based Assessment of Programs

**Assessment**

Student retention directors collaborate with IR staff to conduct outcomes-based assessment on most unit services and programs. Recipients of Department of Education funding must complete these assessments annually and report results to grant liaisons.

**Assessment of Select Retention Programs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Program Name and Description</th>
<th>Demonstrated Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Center for Learning And Student Success at University A</td>
<td>The ACCESS program targets academically at-risk second years (below 2.5 GPA) and facilitates strengths-based coaching on a biweekly basis, access to career counselors, interaction with a faculty mentor, and tutoring in at least one class.</td>
<td>84% of participating students return to the institution the following year, compared to 64% of non-participating students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Support Services (SSS) at University D</td>
<td>The office offers tutoring, specialized academic and career counseling, and other services targeted specifically at low-income, first-generation, and/or disabled students. The office has the capacity to serve 300 students per year, though contacts estimate as many as half of the student body may be eligible.</td>
<td>Students participating in Student Support Services persist from the first year to the second year at a rate of about 80%, as compared to 70% for the student body.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Limitations of Assessment**

**Difficult to Link Individual Program Results to Institutional Student Success Metrics amidst Changing Applicant Profile and Demographics**

Contacts report that it is challenging to attribute the impact of unit offerings to overall institutional performance on student success and retention. Changing demographics, changes in academic profile, and other factors also greatly influence student success metrics. For example, while contacts at University A are proud that year-to-year retention has significantly increased between 2006 and 2011, they acknowledge that during this same time period the university has expanded on-campus housing, built new recreation facilities, and conducted several other enhancements that may contribute to retention gains as well.

**Year to Year Retention Rate at Profiled Universities, 2006 to 2011**

- University A
- University C
- University E
- University D
- University B
- University F

Source: National Center for Education Statistics