



Seven Myths About Student Retention

Joe Cuseo & Teresa Farnum



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By Joe Cuseo, Ph.D. & Teresa Farnum, TFA President

When we think of myths, images of fantastical, sensational stories spring to mind—visions of Hercules, Quetzalcoatl, or Gilgamesh performing magical or otherworldly feats. However, many of the beliefs that are ratified in the student retention realm—sometimes informally via the academic culture and other times directly in policies and practices—are exactly that: myths, or “unproved or false collective belief[s] that [are] used to justify social institution[s]” (Myth, 2011). It is the purpose of this paper to shed light on some key retention untruths that frequently create obstacles to enhancing student learning and success.

Drawing upon research in student retention, years of experience in faculty and leadership positions in higher education, and observations from consulting across hundreds of campuses, we have found the following seven myths to be most common—and most problematic—on college campuses today.

Myth #1: Attrition is a “student problem,” not a campus or institutional problem.

Student persistence depends on both *student effort* and *institutional effort*, i.e., it involves a reciprocal relationship between what the campus *does for* its students and what students do *for*

themselves. Indeed, research reveals that retention is higher at institutions where students: (a) are provided with accurate information and clear lines of communication about institutional purposes, policies, and procedures, (b) are given opportunities to participate in organizational decision-making, and (c) have experiences with administration that support rather than impede their progress (Berger, 2001-2002; Braxton & Brier, 1989; Berger & Braxton, 1998). Indeed, while individual-level characteristics impact the student retention equation to a degree (Arum & Roksa, 2011), the aforementioned studies underscore the importance of institutional qualities in promoting student success.

Myth #2: Retention would not be a problem if we just admitted “better students.”

Student retention depends as much or more on *what* an institution actually does with the students it admits (e.g., on its educational practices and policies) than on *whom* it admits (Tinto, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Moreover, “better students” (i.e., academically well-prepared students from college-educated families) represent a shrinking proportion of the college-age population. Ironically, at the same time that low-

income and first-generation students are reaching record high numbers in college entrance applications, institutions are moving toward greater admissions selectivity (Engle & O'Brien, 2007).

Retention Myth #3: And while we're at it, richer students would help, too.

Particularly in combination with Retention Myth #2, the belief that inability to pay for college lies at the root of student retention is another source of institutions' misconceptions—and inaction. In today's economy, there is little doubt that finances can be a factor in attrition (e.g., Ishitani & DesJardins, 2002); however, they are often used as a straw man to avoid the more complex and difficult realities of retention etiology. For example, in looking at clients' institutional data, the most common predictors of attrition generally are not—as many colleges assume—students' financial status but rather their levels of academic success and social integration. This finding typically holds true across the gamut of students' socioeconomic brackets, meaning that for student bodies at large, finances are not the primary (or even secondary) consideration in students' decisions to terminate their enrollment.

Myth #4: Most students drop out because they “flunk out.”

The reality is that the vast majority of students who withdraw from college are in good academic standing at the time of withdrawal (estimates range

between 75-85%). Thus, most students who leave college do so *voluntarily*—i.e., they do not “flunk out,” nor are they “forced out” by academic dismissal (Gardiner, 1994; Noel, 1985; Tinto, 1988, 1993; Willingham, 1985). Moreover, among the minority of students who are forced to withdraw from college due to poor grades, poor academic performance can often be attributed to non-academic causes (e.g., familial or emotional issues—many of which can be effectively addressed when an institution has proper mechanisms and services in place), an observation that further contradicts the notion that students elect to drop out “simply” because of failing GPAs.

Myth #5: Profiling “leavers” is the best method of understanding attrition.

Developing a nuanced profile of “leavers” can, to be sure, inform the process of structuring retention initiatives. Too frequently, though, the focus on leavers: a) overshadows the primary goal of better providing for enrolled students and b) does not promote an accurate understanding of current students. This is because faulty assumptions are commonly made about the relationship of “leavers” to “stayers.”

Assumption #1: The qualities of “leavers” reflect the characteristics of the “stayers.” Although there are lessons to be learned from those who discontinue their enrollment, assuming that leavers' motivations represent a one-to-one

correspondence with concerns of stayers is erroneous and often misleading.

Assumption #2: Teasing out specific student characteristics for the purpose of comparing leavers and stayers provides accurate insight into differences between groups. Although examining differences between these two groups can be revealing, the comparison itself is frequently undertaken in a faulty fashion. Consider how the data are broken out in the following hypothetical example (a format that is often used in developing stayer versus leaver comparisons):

Students Not Retained		
Characteristic	Not Retained (N)	Attrition (in %)
Residential Students	100	67%
Commuters	50	33%
Total	150	

Based on the data above, an inference commonly made is that residential students are twice as likely to not return as commuter students. However, using the *correct* base of the *entire starting cohort* in data formatting reveals a markedly different picture:

Starting Cohort	N	Not Retained	Attrition (in %)
Residential Students	10,000	100	1%
Commuters	100	50	50%
Total		150	

Though this example is intentionally extreme, it illustrates the dangers of reverse logic rationale: By

looking at the characteristics of the group of students who don't return—rather than the percentage of attrition by characteristics of the starting cohort—specious conclusions are reached.

Myth #6: It's not the faculty's job to "retain" students but to promote student learning.

The very principles and practices that promote student retention (persistence) also promote student learning (academic achievement). For example, both persistence and learning are enhanced when students: (a) become actively engaged in the learning process (Astin, 1993; McKeachie et al., 1986), (b) interact with others to become socially integrated and to "socially construct" knowledge (Bruffee, 1993; Tinto, 1993), and (c) find personal significance (meaning and purpose) in their college experience (Noel, 1985; Weinstein & Meyer, 1991). Thus, institutional interventions designed to increase student retention are likely to increase student learning simultaneously. As retention scholars commonly put it: "Successful retention is nothing more than a byproduct of successful education."

Myth #7: Campuses are already doing all that they can do to improve student retention.

Research suggests that postsecondary attempts to increase college-graduation rates lag well behind other institutional priorities. In a national study of retention programs at four-year college campuses conducted by the College Board (2009), it was

discovered that campus resources for initiatives aimed at increasing student persistence were “minimal and inadequate” and that the vast majority of retention coordinators on college campuses were given “little or no authority” to implement new program initiatives. The study’s results led the College Board to conclude that “overall, there is little evidence that institutions of any type are consistently making a strong effort to manage and organize student retention efforts.” (p. 10). These findings reflect a disturbing reality that pervades many campuses: focusing on student retention is all too often absent from an institution’s culture or strategic plan and convincing stakeholders—whether faculty, staff, and/or

administration—to adopt different orientations (ones that advocate for a proactive approach to student success)—can be challenging.

Conclusion

Is it all doom and gloom? Not in the slightest! Increasing student success and retention is a goal that is entirely achievable—even in this era of expanding student needs and shoestring budgets. Although each campus is unique in terms of where its retention initiatives should best be focused, there are a variety of reliable methods that can increase, often dramatically, the momentum and achievements of retention programs on college campuses.

Interested in establishing how your institution can avoid common retention pitfalls and simultaneously develop effective, dynamic plans to improve graduation rates? Learn more about TFA’s 2011 Workshop event:

TFA’s 7th Annual Student Retention Workshops

Austin, Texas: June 22-24, 2011 / Providence, RI July 20-22, 2011



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-5-

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About the Authors



Dr. Cuseo has authored numerous articles and chapters on faculty development, student retention, the first-year experience, and students in transition. His written work includes a book for first-year seminars or student success courses, *Thriving in College and Beyond: Research-Based Strategies for Academic Success & Personal Development*, and two books on diversity: *Diversity & the College Experience: Appreciating Human Differences* and *Humanity and Diversity and the Liberal Arts: The Foundation of a College Education* (a summer/common reading).

Joe has received the “Diamond Honoree” award from the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), the “Outstanding First-year Student Advocate” award from the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition, and has been a 14-time recipient of the “Faculty Member of the Year” award at Marymount College, a student-driven award based on effective teaching and academic advising.

Teresa Farnum has worked with more than 300 institutions to improve student learning, success, and satisfaction in initiatives to increase retention and graduation rates. She led retention services as vice president at Noel-Levitz for five years before starting her own consulting service in 2004. Specific areas of her expertise include academic advising, developmental studies, honors programming, general education reform, quality/customer service, student life, accreditation activities, and faculty development related to teaching/learning.

Ms. Farnum has held senior staff appointments as assistant to the president at Randolph-Macon Woman's College (VA; now Randolph College) and at Franklin Pierce University (NH). She has two decades of teaching experience as professor of mathematics and also chaired the division of natural sciences. Teresa has significant teaching experience with both adult and traditional students at institutions whose admissions criteria vary from open to highly selective: public four-year colleges, community colleges, private two-year colleges, and private universities.



TFA FACT SHEET

Company Description: Teresa Farnum & Associates (TFA) provides consulting, research, and statistical services for institutions of higher education aiming to increase or shape student enrollment in both retention and recruitment initiatives. TFA prides itself on working collaboratively with schools to develop and implement customized, data-driven retention and enrollment plans at affordable rates. This is accomplished through a practiced belief in creating an institutional culture that values student-centeredness, research-based decisions, and realization of clear, targeted goals. Dedication to high quality work coupled with devotion to affordability makes TFA a recognized leader in change management solutions that produce measurable results.

Company President: After serving as vice president for retention services at Noel-Levitz for five years, Teresa Farnum founded TFA in 2004. Prior to her consulting career, Farnum held a variety of different academic positions including division director, natural sciences; professor of math; and assistant to the president.

Services: TFA offers a suite of enrollment management services within the following domains:

- Student Retention
- Student Recruitment
- Adult Learners
- Statistical Services
- Customized Workshops

Annual Workshops: Every summer, TFA hosts interactive workshops in select locations across the country. Workshop sessions focus on timely topics, related to the full spectrum of enrollment management issues. To ensure attendees are able to participate actively in the sessions, enrollment for each session is capped. Workshop format is varied, incorporating a mix of formal presentations, facilitated small group exercises, and structured networking opportunities, all of which are designed to directly engage participants.

Benefits: TFA provides superior services because of our:

- Broad spectrum of offerings, all of which facilitate the creation of comprehensive student retention and

recruitment solutions designed to match institutions' unique circumstances

- Commitment to pairing consultants' expertise to the needs of the college or university
- Understanding of institutional challenges and solutions across a wide range of campus and population types
- Individualized attention to clients, including unlimited access to company resources and expertise, and the knowledge that TFA is personally invested in institutional success
- Acknowledgment that retention increases are the result of improving student learning, success, and satisfaction; and that improvements in enrollment involve streamlining processes and employing strategic use of resources
- Commitment to maintaining low fees while providing high quality services

Employees: TFA has a dozen associates, all of whom have proven successes in retention and/or recruitment and have held or currently hold senior positions in higher education. In addition to the associates, TFA employs full-time staff who oversee marketing, research, and company operations.

Clients: Teresa Farnum has personally served more than 200 institutions of far-ranging size and characteristics; clients include large, public institutions; small, private institutions; faith-affiliated institutions; historically black colleges and universities; tribal colleges; community colleges of all sizes; proprietary institutions; and state systems across the world.

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