



Undergraduate Retention Challenges

**A Comprehensive Analysis and
Strategic Implementation Guide**

Introduction

Student retention in higher education is a pressing problem, with rates that have remained stagnant for decades. For students who started college in the fall of 2022, the average national retention rate was 68.2% and the persistence rate was 76.5%.¹ This means that more than 23% of students dropped out of college altogether and more than 8% transferred to a different institution.

According to the American Institutes for Research, data from 17 diverse four-year institutions across the U.S. demonstrate that an additional 10% of college students choose not to continue on after the second year of college.² These departures amount to nearly half of those who chose not to continue after the first year, thus highlighting the second year as another crucial transition point for retention.

Primary Factors That Influence Student Retention

There are many factors that influence a student's decision to either remain enrolled or leave college altogether.

These Factors Include:



Financial



Academic
Challenges



Wellness



Relationships



Conflicting
Commitments

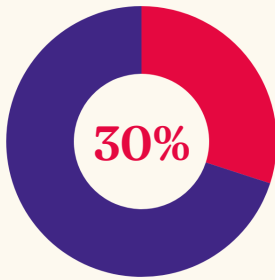
Primary Factors



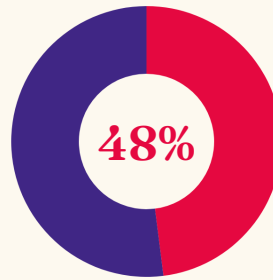
Financial Burden

The path to a college degree can be expensive, and financial factors often play a critical role in many students' long-term choices. Each year, 30% to 40% of all undergraduate students take federal student loans — and **70% of students who receive a bachelor's degree have education debt by the time they graduate.**³ Many current students worry about this future debt and whether their education will enable them to pay off that debt after graduation. When faced with lack of financial support or access to financial resources, students often leave college to lessen their future financial burden and stay financially afloat.

According to Sallie Mae:



Of students at risk for dropping out of college cite financial challenges.



Of students who do drop out indicate that financial challenges played a role in their decision.



Students from low-income families are 3.7 times more likely to drop out before graduating than other students.⁴



Academic Challenges

College courses can be rigorous, and students often find that their earlier education has not adequately prepared them for the expectations of their current curriculum. In addition, **nearly 14% of adults in the U.S. have a cognitive disability** that makes it difficult to concentrate, remember or make decisions⁵ — and these issues can lead to significant academic challenges.

To make matters worse, many campuses don't offer adequate academic support or resources to help students who are struggling academically. Without this safety net, many students can become overwhelmed by their workloads and fall far enough behind to feel like they can't catch up.

Primary Factors Cont.



Mental Health and Wellness

Mental health challenges can have a major impact on a student's academic performance and general outlook. Students with mental health challenges often struggle to keep up with coursework and experience declining grades, which may prompt them to leave a program. Some students may also leave school specifically to focus on their mental health.

How significant a problem is it? Only half of current college students rate their mental health as good or excellent.⁶ In fact, **18% of students at risk for dropping out of college cite mental health issues as a primary barrier to college completion.**⁷



Peer Relationships and Campus Culture

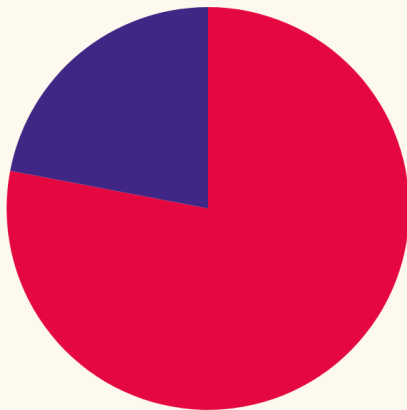
Social integration is a crucial aspect of a student's college experience. But for many students, college environments can mean getting lost rather than finding a path. Positive connections improve a student's sense of well-being, while negative experiences might lead a student to consider leaving the institution. For traditionally aged students who live on campus or take the majority of their courses on campus, a healthy and enriching campus environment can help them feel happy and at ease — which often leads to greater retention.

According to the Institute for Higher Education Policy, in a study of 1,400 first-year students at a diverse research university, those who scored highly on “belonging” had the highest retention rates.⁸

Primary Factors Cont.

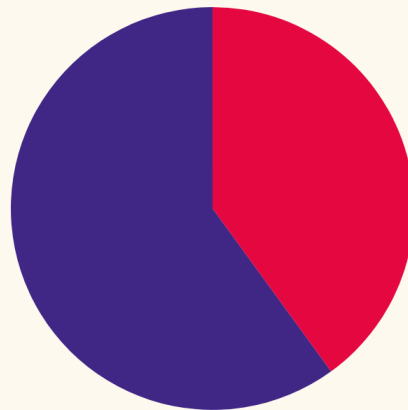
Conflicting Commitments

Balancing the demands on their time, saying no and focusing on priorities tend to be skills that college students still need to learn. Adult students and those studying at community colleges often have full-time jobs and families, while traditional college students might have on-campus jobs, internships, and extracurricular clubs and activities. Students' inability to balance academic and life commitments can sometimes lead to poor academic performance, burnout and, ultimately, the decision to leave school.



78%

Employment of U.S. Part-Time Undergrad Students in 2023.⁹



40%

Employment of U.S. Full-Time Undergrad Students in 2023.⁹

Strategies for Strengthening Student Retention

The challenges of student retention require early intervention and innovative solutions. By strategically addressing those challenges and making thoughtful changes, higher education institutions can help mitigate many attrition risk factors for their students. Schools with solid retention strategies usually have the right programs, policies and support structures in place to effectively help students achieve greater success and accomplish what they set out to do upon enrollment.

The following key strategies and initiatives can be used to create an institution-specific strategic plan that reduces student attrition and furthers student success:

Focus on Financial Support and Literacy

Offering avenues of financial support often prevents students from dropping out.

- **Educate** students about the financial resources available to them — including scholarships, grants, and work-study programs. Helping them maintain financial stability increases the likelihood that they'll complete their studies.
- **Provide** regular and clear communications via text, email and online portals to help ensure financial aid information is readily accessible.
- **Offer** workshops and personalized counseling on financial aid management and budgeting that can help students navigate their financial responsibilities.
- **Combine** financial aid services with other student support services. A holistic support system addresses multiple aspects of student needs.

Strategies for Strengthening Student Retention Cont.

Since 2018, **Georgia State University's Panther Retention Grants** have provided emergency funding that allows students to stay enrolled. Since the start of the program, more than **86% of grant recipients have gone on to graduate**. With **more than 12,000 grants awarded over the past six years**, the Panther Retention Grant program has prevented thousands of students from dropping out of Georgia State.¹⁰

Put Academic Support Front and Center

Strong academic support services play a role in boosting student confidence and reducing student attrition.

- **Ensure** faculty is accessible for questions and discussions, establish writing centers and set up career conferences, all of which can contribute to student success.
- **Send** mid-course surveys to gain a better sense of how students are doing academically — and what support they may need.
- **Offer** alternatives to students who face academic challenges, including tutoring and the option to retake classes.

Since 2007, the **City University of New York's (CUNY) ASAP (Accelerated Study in Associate Programs)** has provided financial resources, structured pathways to support academic momentum and direct support services to more than 100,000 students. The result? **ASAP students have 2X the graduation rate of non-ASAP**.

Prioritize Mental Health and Wellness

Investing in students' mental well-being is essential for institutions and students alike.

- **Offer** mental health services and counseling on campus. This could include individual therapy, support groups, anxiety management, substance abuse education, nutrition counseling, teletherapy and peer-led hotlines.
- **Create** a well-distributed resource guide for students so they understand the breadth of services available to them.
- **Help** increase engagement with student activities, events, clubs, and organizations. This type of engagement can go a long way toward reducing loneliness and creating social communities that drive student happiness —and retention.

Strategies for Strengthening Student Retention Cont.

Foster a Culture of Community and Engagement

Students stay connected to their institutions when they feel seen, heard and understood.

- **Implement** campus-wide initiatives that promote inclusivity and diversity.
- **Focus** on building campus community and cultivating a sense of belonging for all students, especially those at risk of dropping out.
- **Help** students develop deeper connections via small groups and learning communities.
- **Create** a network of peer mentors to engage with students at their level in first-year seminar classes.
- **Leverage** technology via mobile apps for increased engagement and communication.

Provide Options for Students Who Feel Over-Committed and Overwhelmed

Learning to succeed while juggling is a skill that can serve students throughout their lives.

- **Offer** time-and workload-management workshops.
- **Provide** access to mindfulness practices that can assist students in prioritizing their responsibilities.
- **Consider** flexible learning options for students with responsibilities like work, children, or college athletics. Hybrid learning, which allows students to switch between in-person and online learning as necessary, can be very helpful.

Strategies for Strengthening Student Retention Cont.

Gather Student Data for Continuous Improvement

Data can only tell part of a student's story — but it's an excellent starting point.

- **Collect** data on key indicators of students who might be struggling. Tracking poor attendance, failing grades or not earning enough credits on time is an effective way to understand which students might be at risk of dropping out.
- **Utilize** student engagement polls and surveys to become better informed about students' needs and struggles — and gain insights that can help address their issues.

Develop Personalized Intervention Plans

Personalize interventions to make them count.

- **Understand** that for Gen Z students, personalization is table stakes. When they receive personalized messaging, they're more likely to feel invested in the school community.
- **Develop** an ongoing assessment and intervention plan to identify at-risk students and equip them with increased support and services.

In a recent global survey, **75% of Gen Z consumers said they would quit a brand if their experience wasn't personalized.**¹²

Implement Targeted Messaging and Engagement Strategies

Use a personalized and targeted approach for retention-boosting success.

- **Develop** a strategic communication plan that addresses key touchpoints in the student lifecycle.
- **Leverage** data analytics to identify optimal timing and content for student outreach.
- **Use** communication platforms like Motimatic to deliver personalized and timely messages to students.

Implementation Checklist

To implement strategies that boost retention, a phased approach is best.

Assess → Brainstorm → Adopt → Reassess

Assess: Study retention levels and identify factors influencing retention rates.

Brainstorm: Choose the best-fit retention-improvement strategies for your institution.

Adopt: Implement the strategies, monitor progress and make changes as necessary to achieve success.

Reassess: Collect data and compare it to the prior year to evaluate the success of your strategies and programs. Make adjustments for continued progress in retention.

Conclusion

Student retention in higher education directly impacts an institution's financial stability and academic reputation. Of course, high retention isn't a matter of luck — it generally occurs as a result of years of diligent planning, preparation and strategy. A high retention rate indicates a successful learning and cultural environment that effectively supports students toward the completion of their education — which is crucial for individual development and social mobility. Students who don't graduate often head down a path that leads to lower-paying jobs, fewer professional opportunities and less ability to contribute to their communities. For institutions that are serious about improving their retention rates, developing a solid strategy and implementing it successfully will go a long way toward improving retention and changing lives.

About Motimatic

Motimatic's fully managed solution helps higher ed leaders shift student mindsets and drive outcomes. We apply science-backed strategies and learnings to reach, motivate, and enroll more students — without adding staff or integrating software.

- **Trusted by 250+ Colleges and Universities**
- **60+ California Community College Partners**
- **2+ Million Learners Served**
- **239,000+ GuidePosts™**

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