RETENTION BEGINS IN THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Why course success should become a more central part of how colleges support continued enrollment

From the Office of Institutional Progress and Effectiveness
Cuyahoga Community College

How student services became central to retention

Retention work in colleges has always reflected a humane and practical understanding of students' lives. Students do not leave college only because of what happens in the classroom. They leave because money becomes uncertain, work schedules change, family responsibilities increase, transportation fails, health problems emerge, financial aid becomes confusing, confidence weakens, or institutional processes become difficult to navigate.

For open-access institutions especially, these realities have made student services indispensable. Advising, counseling, financial aid, registration, records, tutoring, basic needs support, disability services, orientation, career services, and student engagement all developed around the recognition that students need more than instruction to remain enrolled and make progress. Many students continue because someone helps them interpret a policy, resolve a hold, apply for aid, build a schedule, find tutoring, understand a deadline, or believe that continuing is still possible.

That history deserves respect. Student services has often been where the college becomes more navigable, personal, and responsive to the actual circumstances of students' lives.

An incomplete division of responsibility

The historical development of retention work has also produced an important question for colleges. Has retention become too strongly associated with student services, while the academic experience has remained less fully integrated into the college's retention strategy?

The question is not whether student services should continue to play a central role. It must. Nor is the question whether faculty should become advisors, counselors, financial aid specialists, or case managers. They should not. The question is whether colleges can improve retention by placing greater attention on course success, especially in the early weeks of the term when students are first learning whether college feels manageable, whether effort is producing improvement, and whether they can recover from difficulty.

In many institutions, retention work becomes most visible after academic momentum has already weakened. For example: a student misses assignments, stops attending, and fails a first major assessment. They are flagged through an early alert system and a staff member reaches out. The student may or may not respond. The student may or may not use tutoring or advising and the instructor may or may not know what happens next.

These efforts are valuable. They are far better than institutional silence. But they also reveal a limitation. Much of what colleges call retention work is actually recovery work. It attempts to reengage students after they have already begun to detach from the course, the term, or the institution.

A more complete retention strategy would substantially move the institution's attention earlier in the student experience. It would treat course success not as separate from retention, but as one of its strongest foundations.

Students experience retention through courses, not through organizational charts

Students do not experience the college as separate administrative divisions. They experience it through a sequence of encounters. They receive a financial aid message. They try to register and meet with an advisor. They read a syllabus. They attempt the first assignment and wait for feedback. They try to understand whether they are on track. They decide whether to ask for help. They balance work, family, health, transportation, and money. Across these experiences, they form a private judgment about whether college is manageable, whether effort is leading to improvement, and whether continuing makes sense.

Retention is shaped inside that sequence. Student services plays an essential role, but the academic experience is often where the earliest signs of trouble appear.

A student who misses an early assignment may be disorganized, overworked, confused by the course structure, unsure about expectations, or already embarrassed about falling behind. A student who performs poorly on the first exam may have studied the wrong material, misunderstood the level of expected performance, lacked prerequisite knowledge, or had too little opportunity to test understanding before the exam carried significant weight. A student who stops logging into the learning management system may be disengaged, but may also be overwhelmed, ashamed, uncertain how to recover, or convinced that the course has already become unwinnable.

These are academic signals, but they are also retention signals.

The timing problem in many retention systems

The difficulty is that many colleges are better organized to respond to these signals after they become visible than to design the academic experience so that difficulty is recognized and addressed sooner. The college may have an early alert process, tutoring services, advising appointments, coaching, counseling, and outreach campaigns. Yet the student may still receive feedback too late, misunderstand the expectations of the course, fail a major assessment before having a meaningful chance to practice, or conclude that the course is no longer recoverable before anyone has intervened.

The result is not a failure of care. It is often a failure of timing, connection, and design.

A more effective retention strategy would place course success at the center of the work. This does not mean that academic affairs should replace student services as the home of retention. It means that retention should be understood as a shared institutional responsibility, with course success treated as one of the most important places where student momentum is created or lost.

Why faculty partnership matters

Faculty shape many of the conditions through which students first discover whether they are succeeding, struggling, or falling behind. The clarity of expectations, the design of early assignments, the timing of feedback, the transparency of grading, the sequencing of assessments, the relationship between class activity and evaluated work, and the instructor's response to early confusion all influence whether students experience academic difficulty as something they can recover from or something that confirms they do not belong.

Retention cannot be fully separated from those conditions.

This is especially important in community colleges. Many community college students attend part-time. Many work significant hours. Many have family responsibilities. Many are first-generation students or returning adults. Many are trying to understand not only course content but also how college itself works. Many are taught by adjunct faculty who may have limited paid time for institutional coordination beyond the course. These realities make student services indispensable, but they also make the design of the course experience more important, not less.

When students have limited time, delayed feedback carries greater consequences. When students are unsure how college works, unclear expectations become more damaging. When students are balancing work and family, a missed assignment can quickly become a decision about whether staying enrolled is realistic. When students have had uneven academic preparation, the first graded assessment may strongly influence whether they believe improvement is possible.

Referral is important, but it is not sufficient

A course success strategy would ask academic affairs and student services to share responsibility for student momentum. It would not collapse the distinction between teaching and student support. Instead, it would build a stronger connection between the two.

In many institutions, that connection has been too dependent on referral. A faculty member notices concern and refers the student to tutoring, advising, counseling, or another support service. Referral is important. It can connect students to help they need. But referral alone cannot carry the full weight of retention. Tutoring works best when it is connected to the actual expectations of the course. Advising works best when students receive timely information about their academic standing. Coaching works best when encouragement is paired with clear evidence about what the student needs to do next. Financial aid and basic needs support are

more effective when students are reached before academic damage becomes difficult to reverse.

The issue is not that referral is inappropriate. The issue is that referral is often treated as the main bridge between academic affairs and student services when the student's situation may require a more integrated response.

Course success as the prevention side of retention

A course success strategy would begin earlier in the term. The first assignments would be designed not only to grade students, but to reveal whether students understand the expectations of the course. Feedback would arrive soon enough to affect the next piece of work. Students would be able to tell, well before midterm, whether they are on track and what they can do if they are not. Faculty would have better information about where students are encountering difficulty. Student services would receive more timely and actionable signals. Academic departments would examine patterns across high-enrollment and gateway courses, not to assign blame, but to understand where students most often lose momentum.

This work does not require lowering standards. In fact, it depends on taking standards seriously. Academic standards are most meaningful when students understand them, have opportunities to practice toward them, receive timely feedback on their progress, and know what improvement requires. A course success strategy does not ask faculty to pass students who have not learned. It asks whether more students could meet legitimate expectations if the course made expectations clearer, detected misunderstanding earlier, and connected students to help while there was still time for the help to matter.

That distinction is essential. Faculty may reasonably worry that retention language can become pressure to preserve enrollment at the expense of learning. A serious course success strategy should reject that pressure. The purpose is not to inflate grades or weaken academic expectations. The purpose is to improve the conditions under which students attempt to meet those expectations.

Better evidence for action during the course

Faculty should be treated as central partners in evidence use. Many colleges have invested heavily in dashboards, reports, and analytics. These tools can help leaders understand patterns in enrollment, course success, withdrawal, completion, and achievement gaps. But much of this evidence arrives after the student experience has already unfolded. Faculty need information that supports action while the course is still in progress.

Some useful questions might include: Which early assignments are most strongly associated with later course failure? Which concepts or skills create the most difficulty for students? Which course moments are followed by withdrawal or disengagement? Which students attend regularly but perform poorly? Which students submit work but misunderstand the standard?

Which sections show stronger student recovery after early difficulty? Which supports appear to help students continue successfully in particular courses?

These are not merely data questions. They are design questions. They connect evidence to the day-to-day academic experience.

Rethinking early alert as a feedback loop

Early alert systems illustrate the challenge. Many early alert systems are built on a reasonable idea: faculty often see signs of difficulty before anyone else does. But in practice, early alert systems can become too late, too general, or too disconnected from the course. Faculty identify concern. Student services reaches out. The student is encouraged to seek help. The alert may not produce a response quickly enough to affect the next assignment, the next assessment, or the student's confidence in the course. The feedback loop may not return to the instructor or department in a way that improves course design.

In that model, faculty can become observers of student difficulty rather than full partners in resolving it. They see the concern and report it, but much of the work of retention moves elsewhere.

A stronger model would keep more of the response connected to the point where the difficulty first becomes visible. If students miss early assignments, the response should include both academic and student support action. If many students perform poorly on the first major assessment, the department should be able to examine whether the issue is student preparation, course pacing, instructional design, assessment design, or some combination. If students withdraw after predictable points in the course, those points should become part of the institution's improvement work. If tutoring is offered, it should be aligned with the course expectations and timed to the moments when students are most likely to need it.

What shared responsibility requires

This kind of strategy requires academic affairs leadership. It also requires respect for faculty work. Faculty cannot be asked to assume broader responsibility for course success without time, support, useful evidence, and structures that make the work possible. Adjunct faculty, in particular, cannot be expected to participate in institutional redesign without attention to compensation, communication, and inclusion. Departments cannot be expected to improve course success without access to relevant data, protected time for collective inquiry, and a culture that allows honest examination of results without reducing the conversation to blame.

Student services also needs to be positioned as a full partner in the design of the academic student experience. Its role should not be limited to receiving referrals after students are already in trouble. Student services professionals bring deep knowledge about student behavior, institutional navigation, advising patterns, financial barriers, communication problems, and the non-academic pressures that affect enrollment. That knowledge should inform course success work from the beginning. Advisors, tutors, counselors, financial aid

staff, and student experience professionals often understand the points at which students become confused or discouraged. Their insight should help academic affairs identify where course design, program structure, scheduling, communication, and support systems are not aligned with student reality.

The goal is not to move retention responsibility from student services to academic affairs. That would simply reverse the imbalance. The goal is to build a more accurate model of shared responsibility.

In that model, student services remains essential because students need help navigating college and managing the pressures that affect enrollment. Academic affairs becomes more central because course success is one of the strongest foundations of retention. Faculty become more intentional partners in student success because teaching, assessment, feedback, and course design are not separate from retention. Institutional research and effectiveness functions help by identifying patterns, clarifying signals, and supporting improvement cycles. Senior leaders help by aligning expectations, incentives, resources, and accountability across divisions.

Moving retention closer to the student's actual experience

The language of retention sometimes makes the work sound as though the college is trying to hold onto students after they have decided to leave. That is part of the work, but it is not sufficient. The more important question is what happens before that decision forms. Does the student understand what the course requires? Does the student receive feedback while improvement is still possible? Does the student know where to go for help? Does the instructor know which students are losing momentum?

Those questions, among others, bring retention closer to the lived experience of students.

For community colleges, the stakes are especially high. Access is not fulfilled at admission. It is fulfilled through the student's ability to make progress in courses, complete meaningful credits, build confidence, and continue toward a credential or goal. A college may offer extensive services, but if students repeatedly encounter academic experiences in which expectations are unclear, feedback is late, support is disconnected, or recovery comes too slowly, too many will leave before the institution has had a real chance to help them succeed.

The most effective retention strategy, then, is a course success strategy supported by student services, led jointly with academic affairs, and understood as part of the overall student experience.

That strategy honors the history and continuing importance of student services. It respects faculty by recognizing that teaching is not merely content delivery, but a central part of how students build confidence, competence, and momentum. It protects academic standards by focusing on the conditions that help students meet them. Most importantly, it serves students

by moving institutional attention closer to the moments when difficulty first appears and success is still within reach.

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