Protecting your investment

What you can do to maximize student persistence

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Fings ain’t wot they used to be

- The Australia (Perth in particular) where I was born in 1954 is very different from Australia today
  - Perth Population 1950 was 312,000
  - Australia: 9 million
  - Total number of university students in Australia: 30,000
View from King’s Park over the city ~1950
Things had changed by the 1970s

- I was very excited to begin university studies in 1972.
- Most of my school leaver contemporaries had left in year 10, or during year 11 and 12 – and went straight into the workforce.
- Perth population 1970: 611,000
- Australia: 13 million
View from King’s Park ~1970

- It’s nice to see the world is now in colour
Time, gravity and bad habits take a terrible toll

The world of today is much more interesting, if only I could remember new things...

- Perth population 2016: 2 million
- Australia: 24.6 million
- Total number of university students in Australia: 1.4 million
View from King’s Park - recent
 Agenda

Our major sections today:

- A bit of background about persistence, retention, attrition and student engagement
- The factors affecting student success and persistence
- What can we do to improve each student’s chance of success?

What I hope you will take away from the workshop:

1. If it all reaffirms what you already know, and you think you are doing a good job – that is great!
2. If there are gaps in what you are doing, perhaps you can return to your workplace and begin to plug them
3. If there are huge gaping holes in your institution’s approach to student persistence/success, then you have a lot of work to do
Retention and Attrition are words bandied about a lot - What are we talking about?

Essentially, it is an attempt to answer the simple question: Are last year’s students still here this year? (Except for those who completed their course – but they are mostly important to recruit into postgraduate programs....)

- But.... It is a problematical measure
- It gives a different figure depending on:
  - when you take the measure
  - who is included

- The measure also tells you nothing about how and why.
Variability of Retention: most places do not have numbers to boast about

- Highly competitive institutions (e.g. Oxford University) or programs (e.g. NIDA) have very high retention rates. People who gain a place in these do not give them up lightly.
- Places with low enrolment numbers and/or quirky demographics can have weird retention data – up and down all over the place.
- Other places or courses (which shall remain nameless) can have very low rates.
- Australian broad brush statistics 2001-2014 can be found at [https://docs.education.gov.au/node/41761](https://docs.education.gov.au/node/41761)
Discussion

- What do you know about rates of persistence, attrition, retention (call it what you will) at your institution?
- Who is responsible for the data? (i.e. Who deals with it at an operational level? And which senior exec person “owns” it?)
- How openly are the data shared?
- Are there sensitivities to be concerned about when discussing the issue?
- Who are your institutional allies and potential champions?
What is a **desirable** retention rate?

- We are probably going to keep most students anyway. What we want is to keep more of them - But we know it can never be 100%

- We do not really know for sure what the figure could be under the best possible scenario.

- i.e. the ideal retention rate is somewhere a bit better than what it is now but not quite 100%.

- OR – to put it another way - no student has left for a **preventable** reason (which of course raises the question “what is a preventable reason?”)
Some limits of the word “retention”

1. It is an **institutional** goal, not a **student** goal – whoever said “I would like to be retained?”.

2. It is an **outcome** measure of a very complex bundle of interacting variables

3. It is not a very nice word with some unfortunate other associations.

4. And “attrition” is equally problematical, with connotations of sandpaper
   - However… if we get student **engagement** right, better retention figures should be one of the outcomes.
Engagement

- Three metaphors

Gears
Betrothal
Combat
Engagement in the educational context

- There is no single generally accepted definition.

- It is a multi-faceted concept, and best understood in terms of the typical measurements taken.

- WARNING: Psycho-educational jargon on following slide......but while we are looking at it, let’s reflect on who has responsibility for each of these areas.
# The AUSSE (based on the American NSSE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Challenge</th>
<th>Extent to which expectations and assessments challenge students to learn</th>
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<tr>
<td>Active Learning</td>
<td>Students’ efforts to actively construct their knowledge</td>
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<td>Student and Staff Interactions</td>
<td>Level and nature of students’ contact with teaching staff</td>
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<td>Enriching Educational Experiences</td>
<td>Participation in broadening educational activities</td>
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<td>Supportive Learning Environment</td>
<td>Feelings of legitimation within the university community</td>
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<td>Work Integrated Learning</td>
<td>Integration of employment-focused work experiences into study</td>
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So...who is responsible for successful student engagement?

- The teaching area?
- The faculty?
- The whole university community?
- Specialist areas for their relevant thing?
- The student?
- All of the above?
Back to retention…..We know very well what affects retention as there has been so much research on it – putting the word “retention” into a research proposal seems to be a good strategy

- It is the outcome of a series of interacting variables – not simple single factors

- Various research studies categorise them differently

- Many overlap with Engagement
Let’s call it something else

- What we are all interested in is student success

- So – what makes a difference to a student succeeding and persisting through to the end of his/her course?
One: Why are you at University?

Successful students have clear motivation

- Career path
- Intrinsic interest in course content
- Or both
- Or some other good reason that works e.g. family support, ambition to be filthy rich…
Discussion

- What are the indicators of possible low motivation for a course?
- What can you offer such a student?
Two: A stable place to live and study...

It's important to have somewhere:

- Safe and affordable
- Appropriate for study - e.g. desk, computer, other stuff that may be needed
- Living with people supportive of study – or at least not sabotaging study
- A reasonable commute to campus – if enrolled internally
Discussion

- What kind of services may help students with accommodation difficulties?

  On or near campus options
  Assistance with required equipment
  Finding student house-mates
  Conflict resolution
  Deals with transport and parking providers
Three: Money

Successful students:

Understand what it all costs –

and are aware of “hidden” costs that may sneak up

Have enough financial support so that their jobs do not impact on class and study

Seek help if money problems emerge rather than just trying to work a lot of extra hours
Common money problem….

- Students need money – therefore students work
- Students under-estimate time demands of study
- Employers hours do not necessarily fit with study hours
- Making money takes a higher priority
- Or something goes wrong that requires money to fix.
- Student falls behind
- Stress city…..we can lose a student because of relatively trivial debts

It is therefore important to have access to small emergency loans or “bail out of trouble” funds
Discussion

- Share what financial advisory and/or support options you have
Four: Attendance and staying up to date

- There is a strong relationship between attendance and grades. (For on-line courses, replace “attendance” with “attend to…."

- Students who stay up to date have a greater probability of success

- Falling behind can become a vicious circle of always trying to catch up.
Attendance

- Students who attend virtually all classes and put in the associated study are almost always successful.

The graph below is something I present to students. It is from a Chicago study whose reference I have now lost, but it makes a good visual point.
How do we know who isn’t attending (or attending to) if we don’t mark the roll like school teachers?

- Log-ins to student portals by key dates
- Non-submission of assignments – especially those early in the teaching semester

- Then what? - Make contact and offer help in a respectful manner
- Contact – via what channel????

Footer text - slideshow title 30.07.2010
Five: Interpersonal Connections

- Students who form good relationships with other students:
  - feel much more at ease at Uni
  - have a support network
  - have a happier time

- It could be
  - other students in the course,
  - faculty clubs,
  - Guild clubs,
  - recreational courses
  - or anybody at all.

- It almost doesn't matter who - just so long as you are connected to somebody.

- PLUS: we must not ignore the student/staff relationship
Making connections

- When? From pre-orientation through orientation and then intensively throughout at least first semester
- Do not ignore those entering a course at a point later than a standard first year program

- A mentor program is best. No-one has more credibility with a beginning student than someone who recently did the same thing
- Let’s share what kind of mentor programs you have…
Six: Development of good study/learning skills and use of the available learning supports

- There are obvious challenges in meeting the academic demands in higher education
- Good pedagogy should embrace the development of the skills required
- Good support systems connect students in need to the right academic support services in a timely manner
- N.B. Sometimes students miss that this includes effective use of library resources and IT resources
Discussion

- What does your learning support look like?
- Embedded in teaching areas and course programs?
- Expectations that specialist services will “fix” struggling students?

- Early “failure” is disheartening – how do we identify and assist students who do not do well (or as well as they would wish) on early assessments?
Seven: Navigating the admin system ...

- Some students leave because they have not understood and used the possible complexities of a large bureaucracy. They need to make sense of things like:

  - Admin processes such as enrolment, withdrawal, fees and so forth
  - Parking
  - Sanctions and fines
  - etc ad infinitum

We need to make admin processes as simple and transparent as possible
Discussion: your admin system

- If you had the power to change one thing about your existing processes/policies – what would it be?
- Are support services staff at your institution involved in any reviews of processes/policies?
Eight: Deal with any problems issues as soon as they arise

- Unforeseen things can go wrong.
  - Sickness
  - Car crash
  - Relationship problems
  - Issues in personal life
  - Mental health
  - Whatever else – sometimes s**t happens.

Therefore:

- Easy-to-access support services must be available
- Students need to know what they are, and where they are
- The service and the student must be connected in a timely way

So – how accessible are the services that deal with these kinds of issues? What barriers are there?
Nine: Anticipate and address other variables

If there are known issues… they need to be addressed ASAP

Medical Conditions and/or Disabilities
Family needs
Demographic variables
Employment commitments
Or whatever…
Discussion

- How often have you thought (whilst seeing a student) – “if only you had dropped in two months ago”?
- How do you get the “anticipate and address” message out to students?
Some systems data will allow you to identify some potentially at-risk students

- Mature-aged students
- Students who have come from “elsewhere” (a place where it is always fine according to weather forecasters) – anyone who has to leave home is carrying a risk factor whether international, rural/isolated or whatever
- Declared medical conditions and disabilities
- Other identifiable risk groups?? Ideas??

- Other risk factors are not visible to our data systems – employment and family commitments as an obvious example
And if “systems” don’t help?

- Discussion: Who is likely to notice that a student is at-risk?

- You need to have good working relationships with these people...
What can you do as an institution?

Establish a small number of institution-wide principles

1. The student experience and student retention is everyone’s business, not the business of any single specialist support service

2. Multiple interventions are needed as we are dealing with a multi-variable interacting phenomenon playing out over time. There is no single magic bullet

3. Persistence at the institution is a higher goal than persistence in the original enrolling area.
Then what?

- The quality of the whole student experience for every student is important – people who are having a good experience are less likely to drop out than those who are having a bad time.

- When the water level is higher, fewer boats scrape the bottom and cease to float....
What’s does the “Big Picture” of the student experience look like at your institution?

Virtually **everything** we do is part of the student experience and should be as positive as we can make it. E.g.:

- Admin processes
- How students are treated when they make contact with **anyone**
- How effectively students are re-directed if they make contact with the wrong area – being given the “run-around” is a very negative experience
- Campus signage
- Safety and security
- Quality of teaching and study locations
- Accessibility of support
- And almost **anything** else.

Ask yourself what it must feel like to enter the physical or on-line environment as a student. Would you go there yourself?
Analytics can help

- The relatively recent capacities of analytics:
  - Tell us a lot about our own student populations
  - Allow early identification of students at-risk
  - Provide capacity for automated interventions

- Then what? What will you do that makes a difference???
  - There is no point in identifying students who are at-risk if we have nothing useful to offer them
Some key intervention points: make contact with these people

- Students who are offered a place but not enrolled in a timely way – you may lose them before they even arrive
- Those daunted by the first few days/weeks – they stop logging in....
- Those who miss the first assessment deadline or scores a fail grade on an early assessment
- Students who fail one or more units
- Students put on academic probation
- Those who have not re-enrolled by the official re-enrolment date
Comprehensive Support Systems

Some students will need these services, and sometimes they will need them in a hurry. A lack of well-resourced support services will lead to greater than necessary drop out. Accessible services needed include:

- Good career and course switching advice services
- Social programs to encourage peer-to-peer connections
- Easily accessible IT support
- Housing and tenants’ advice services
- Learning skills, study skills, communication skills services
- Transparent and easy-to-navigate admin processes – and availability of help to those in need
- Financial advice and emergency loans
- Professional counselling, disability and health services
- And possibly others, depending on context
A brief aside

- Protecting your investment also means looking after the staff providing support. Staff work best when:

  They have some reasonable level of job security
  They are well trained
  They have access to professional development opportunities
  They feel part of a comprehensive planned approach
Active programs – such as…

- Programs/interventions delivered to all students within a particular target group (e.g. Orientation Programs). These programs seek to inoculate students with the capacity to recognise a difficulty and connect to help in a timely manner.

- Programs delivered as to students who are known to be at-risk – either by behavioural measures or demographic.

- Services made available to students on the basis of self-referral or staff referral – usually as a result of something undesirable happening.
But…. Students won’t engage with programs or services if:

- They don’t know they exist
- They don’t know what the services do
- Perceive that the service is somehow not applicable to them
Curtin’s 2009 research into AWOL students provided several key findings

1. Approximately 40% of the AWOL sample indicated they wished to be contacted by the University to facilitate returning to study at Curtin.

2. Approximately 20% of the sample were now studying at another Western Australian university – largely in courses that are offered at Curtin.

3. Only 5% of the sample had any contact with Curtin support services prior to their departure to discuss the issues related to their decision to discontinue study – they just walked away….

4. We estimated that 60+% of these students could have continued if they had accessed the right support/advice in a timely way.

- Our conclusion: If you can talk to someone (or some other personalised communication process) who is thinking of dropping out, it is likely you can offer some form of support or flexibility that will either retain them or bring them back after a short gap.
To summarise this workshop in two statements

- Identifying and making contact to students at risk of attrition is useful only if you are able to offer them something that will make a difference.
- Remember Dr Jim’s Golden Rule of Two: If the first person a student talks to is unable to help, make sure the second one can.
What I hope you take away from this workshop...

1. If it all reaffirms what you already know, and you think you are doing a good job – that is great!

2. If there are gaps in what you are doing, perhaps you can return to your workplace and begin to plug them

3. If there are huge gaping holes in your institution’s approach to student persistence/success, then you have a lot of work to do
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