Online Retention: Keeping the Nontraditional Student Connected

Susan Adragna, Ph.D.

PhD Program Chair-Educational Leadership

Keiser University

sadragna@keiseruniversity.edu

1900 W. Commercial Blvd.

Ft. Lauderdale, Fl. 33309

Sara Malmstrom, Ph.D.

Dean-Graduate School

Keiser University

saram@keiseruniversity.edu

1900 W. Commercial Blvd.

Ft. Lauderdale, Fl. 33309

Submission: Research

Key words: Student retention, action research, online retention strategies, nontraditional students

Abstract

In a time of economic challenges, online education is experiencing continued growth. The convenience of portability and rigorous programs attract a diverse student population. Many newly enrolled online students are nontraditional. Variables related to the retention of nontraditional online students are gaining attention, as the focus on accountability becomes a factor that will affect profitability, reputations, and student success in job placement after graduation. Early identification of online nontraditional students who may be at-risk of failure is not enough, as identification frequently is too late. The implementation of resources is ineffective if efforts are not precisely coordinated in a way that students perceive as valuable to their success. The retention and program completion of nontraditional online students is dependent upon the ability to provide the personalized, "small school" feel with the integrated support systems found in large colleges and universities. A transparent, measurable commitment to student success must be the shared goal of all administrators, faculty, and staff, as the retention and program completion of online nontraditional students is critical to job placement after graduation, institutional profitability, and the stability of the national economy.

Introduction

According to Seidman's (2005) retention formula, early, intensive, and continuous intervention is necessary to help at risk students persist. Assuming Seidman's formula is sound, how would administrators of an online degree program identify at risk students? Identification is only the first step, followed by devising and implementing appropriate interventions with the achievable objective of graduating students. How is this accomplished in the online environment? This paper consists of an action research application of Seidman's retention formula in a Master of Science in Education with a fully online delivery.

Background

The university in this study has a diverse population consisting of nontraditional adult students. Most students in the Master of Science in Education (MSE) are working adults. Seventy-three percent are female; 53% are Black, Hispanic, or multi-ethnic. Many have family responsibilities, both as parents and caregivers to elder family members. The students come from a variety of undergraduate backgrounds and myriad professional experiences, although the field of education predominates in educational background and professional experience.

Timeline to Degree and Perception

Full time students can complete the intensive 36 semester hour degree in 12 months. Many students are attracted by the possibility of completing an online degree program in a short time. They are often unprepared for the rigor and time demands required to complete successfully the program in the minimum time. Further, a misperception exists regarding online degree programs; the misperception is that online degrees are easier than traditional brick and mortar degrees are. Students soon learn that online degree programs are not easier; they are merely more convenient. Online programs also leave many students feeling isolated and disconnected from their classmates and university, creating retention challenges.

Admissions Requirements

Admissions standards require applicants to hold a baccalaureate degree from an accredited institution. Prospective students must submit two letters of recommendation and a professional resume. Students with an undergraduate grade point average (GPA) less than 2.7 are admitted, but must complete the first semester with a 3.0 GPA and no grades below B. Students who fail to meet this standard must take an entrance test, such as a GRE, and score at the 40% level nationally. Failure to meet the first semester GPA requirement or to complete successfully an entrance test results in dismissal. The university loses 75% of the students who enroll with an undergraduate GPA less than 2.7 to cancellation, drop, and dismissal by the end of their first semester of enrollment.

Course Structure

Three semester credit hour classes are 8 weeks in length. A typical class opens with students posting an introduction and the instructor welcoming each student into the class. Students are assigned several chapters of reading weekly. Students post substantial, cited, scholarly discussion postings weekly and must substantively respond to a minimum of two other posts. Additionally, research essays, interviews, annotated bibliographies, literature reviews, design projects, and research papers are required throughout courses. Library research is stressed in the degree program, facilitated by library access from within the course room. Students who value their success easily spend a minimum of 10 hours per week on course work, inside and outside the online course room.

Program History

The MSE program at the university began in August of 2008. To date, 26 students have graduated yielding a retention rate of 56%. Currently, 93 students are enrolled. In January 2010, a spike in student drops occurred throughout the online graduate school. An analysis was conducted. The platform, teachers, curriculum, classes, and textbooks were all the same as in 2009. The primary difference identified was new admissions counselors had been hired who were potentially less familiar with the graduate program requirements and faculty. The attrition spike was determined to be an

anomaly. February indicated a decline in student drops, followed by an alarming increase in March. During the month of April, an in-depth analysis was conducted by the Dean of the Graduate School and program faculty. Subsequent to the analysis, a number of interventions were assessed and immediately implemented, with the goal of improving student retention.

The analysis revealed that of the students who dropped from the graduate school, 58% were January 2010 enrollments who left within their first term. In the MSE program, 25% of the students who enrolled in January dropped before the end of the term. The next largest terminus point occurred at the end of the second semester, when students who had not made satisfactory academic progress were dismissed from the university. Significantly, the percentage of students who dropped at that point was much less than those who left within their first semester.

Reasons for Leaving

Students who leave the university are dropped using a form called a Student Status Change. The form includes, among other things, a reason for leaving the program. The reason is collected based on interviews with the dean, student advisors, and faculty. Some students disappear without providing a reason, but most students who terminate their enrollment do so with an assigned reason. The attrition reasons given are health, finances, employment, natural disaster (such as the Haitian earthquake in January, 2010), academic dismissal, program rigor, and a category labeled missing in action (MIA). There are undoubtedly a myriad of underlying reasons, which are not stated but are driving forces in student departure.

An example of the aforementioned milieu was Louise, a pseudonym for a student who enrolled in January 2010, the day after the term started. Louise did not complete the new student orientation. She was unfamiliar with platform navigation. Her textbooks did not arrive until the second week of class. She was a single mother with three children, and Louise was Haitian. Shortly after the devastating earthquake in Haiti she withdrew from the program. Why did Louise drop? No one reason could be assigned, but many were indicated.

Students leave an online degree program because they do not feel connected or affiliated with the university or their fellow students. Adult learners returning to school often feel like imposters who will be discovered because they are not adequately prepared for graduate school. These students are particularly susceptible to embarrassment and even intimidation. Many students do not have the critical thinking and/or the writing skills needed to be successful at the graduate level. Remediation is required for those students to be successful. However, some resort to plagiarism, passing off work readily available on the internet as their own. Students who engage in academic dishonesty and are discovered frequently drop or are dismissed. Students who enroll at the last minute do not integrate well because they miss orientation, a critical process to familiarize students with the university, degree program requirements, and resources available to provide assistance. Some students fail to persist because they do not have the skill to function in a technological environment. Other students do not have reliable access to the appropriate technology, primarily a computer with Microsoft applications loaded, and an internet connection. Students, especially those who are in the fragile early stages of their enrollment, leave because their books do not arrive on time for them to engage in the first weeks of the class. Once a student falls behind, many do not have the capacity to catch up.

Problem Identification, Analysis, and Intervention Development

The MSE retention was trending in the wrong direction. A thorough analysis was conducted revealing problems in a variety of areas. The next step was to assess the literature, implement best practices, and develop interventions with the goal of increasing student persistence. This involved changing the culture to some extent and creating buy in with faculty and administrative staff to adopt the interventions developed. Failure to make dramatic, positive improvement in student retention would lead to loss of revenue and resources for the university. More importantly, it would lead to loss of potential to society created by educated, productive working adults.

Literature Review

In a time of economic challenges, online education continues to experience increased student enrollments. Moreover, double-digit increases in enrollments fuel speculations regarding the sustainability of growth patterns (Allen & Seaman, 2010). While prospects for continued growth appear positive, the numbers of students who leave within the first year also continue to increase (Coley & Coley, 2010). Given institution and student costs related to student attrition, a shift in focus, student blame to institutional involvement and accountability, occurred (Tinto, 2006/2007) and a sense of urgency established (Kotter, 1996). This shift is the core of institutional vision, mission, and culture; administrative and faculty mindsets; and resulting actions.

Culture

Senge (1990) discussed the concept of learning as a multifaceted cooperation of organizational members working toward a common goal expressed as a shared mission. Efforts to retain students have been fragmented and traditionally the task of student affairs departments. Although institutions collect retention data, transforming the data into a cohesive plans require using data to create practices for students and institutional actions (Coley & Coley, 2010; Tinto, 2006/2007). Enactment of such plans requires the organizational culture to do so. What is this culture? Senge (1990) suggested a larger purpose, meaningful experience, and "being connected" (p. 12). Organizational connectedness is the sharing of information and strategies as a team, unlike past models of isolation. Open discourse among various department members undergirds creativity in developing unique actions to support the needs of faculty and ultimately students. Bean (2005) suggested faculty and staff needed to understand "why" students leave. What works in one institution might not work in others (Senge, 1990). Moreover, what works today, might not work tomorrow. The culture of learning to adapt and create based on data and student needs is at the heart of student retention.

Learning Community

The culture of learning is not restricted to administrators and faculty. Students who lack the sense of belonging to a community of learners are less engaged in the learning process, feel isolated from peers and faculty, and are more likely to dropout (Tinto, 2001). “Indeed research has repeatedly shown that involvement or the lack thereof is, after controlling for individual attributes, the single most important predictor of student persistence” (Tinto, 2001, p. 3).

Among the numerous strategies used to improve the retention of students, two models of learning communities emerged as most effective--*shared learning* and *connected learning* (Tinto, 2001). Shared learning occurs on multiple levels. In the online environment, discussion is a common venue to share knowledge on a given topic. On a deeper level, students who are enrolled as a group in the same courses each semester form relations and support systems that sustain academic success (Tinto, 2001). Connected learning refers to a common thread shared by students, such as the degree concentration or topic of study (Tinto, 2001). Belonging to a community provides the social support needed to persist. Attendance matters (Education Policy Institute, 2008). Students persist when social, emotional, and intellectual connections are made (Bean, 2005).

Motivation

How do online institutions facilitate the social, emotional, and intellectual connections needed for increased student retention? How do institutional leaders motivate faculty and staff to provide more than superficial, sporadic efforts? How do nontraditional students remain motivated while enrolled in an online program of study? Coley and Coley (2010) suggested the connected learning approach to “build bridge[s]” (p. 7) needed for faculty and staff motivation. Early identification of at-risk students is only the first step. Communication between departments

regarding student progress establishes a sense of team, value, and ownership of student issues (Coley & Coley, 2010). Connectedness is to team and to students. Seidman (2005) asserted faculty members have the most influence on the attitudes of students; and therefore, the "greatest effect on retention" (p. 223). If faculty members are "passively defiant" in efforts to reach out to at-risk, nontraditional students, then the perceived level of caring results in low student motivation. If, motivation is low, then the motivation to succeed academically will also be low. Moreover, as students continue to fail academically, stress elevates and negative perceptions about the institution and faculty ensue (Seidman, 2005). Dropping out is a way to save face (Seidman, 2005).

Commitment

Commitment is multi-faceted. Institutional commitment consists of the vision, mission, and resources to support student success, especially for nontraditional, low-income, and under-represented student populations (Seidman, 2005). Ormrod (2008) discussed the commitment levels of students. Success or failure to meet the challenges of academics in the online environment largely depends on one's perception of self and the perceived ability to be successful. If academic success is related to effort and commitment, then students who have experienced failure might perceive future efforts a waste of time and stop trying (Ormrod, 2008). High standards for all students are a "condition for success" (Seidman, 2008, p. 321). Faculty who hold low standards are not supporting students who strive to reach their potential. Kuh (2003) indicated that first year students spend less time studying. Further, Kuh (2003) suggested some faculty hold lower expectations to lighten their workload. Online students will make the commitment to do the work if faculty members provide support, feedback, and clearly communicated expectations (Kuh, 2003).

Support

“Support is a condition that promotes student success” (Seidman, 2008, p. 322). For at-risk students, support can be academic, such as one-on-one tutoring, resource courses, and tutorials; and people—instructors, classmates, advisors, family, and friends. Of all the support available, faculty support, personalized and honest feedback in written and verbal formats, are critical to the retention of students considered nontraditional and at-risk (Seidman, 2008). The personalized attention given to students who are at risk of dropping out affords a caring, “students first” feel while providing the support unique to the needs of the individual student.

A transparent, measurable commitment to student success must be the shared goal of all administrators, faculty, and staff, as the retention and program completion of online nontraditional students is critical to job placement after graduation.

Methodology

Research Methodology

“Action Research is a common methodology employed for improving conditions and practice in classrooms and in other practitioner-based environments such as administrative, leadership, social, and community settings” (Craig, 2009, p. 3). Action research involves looking at many variables simultaneously to assess the overarching problem and determine, to the extent possible, causality. The goal of action research is to inform and improve practice. Many forms of data are reviewed and analyzed in a field work setting. Quantitative methodology or statistical techniques may be used, or alternatively, qualitative techniques of categorizing and identifying patterns may be employed. The ultimate goal of action research is to identify the problem, design a treatment or plan of action, implement the plan, and assess effectiveness to improve practice (Craig, 2009).

The dean and faculty attacked the problem from several fronts simultaneously. The first task was to determine what categories of students were at risk for departing the program. Characteristics of

dropped students were examined with a goal of developing trends in causality. Once causality was theorized, a plan could be developed for early, intensive, and continuous intervention.

Data Sources

The data mined initially came from monthly drop reports, which were database generated lists of students who dropped from the MSE program. The reports included the date each dropped student started the program, the date the student departed the program, the admissions counselor who enrolled the student, and other information. Dropped students were categorized by a variety of characteristics. An obvious category immediately identified was students who enrolled with undergraduate GPAs less than 2.7. Students in that category were evaluated using the drop report to identify the number and percentage of students who left with an academic history that clearly put them at risk. Dropped students were categorized by admissions counselors to evaluate for potential patterns. Dropped students were also categorized by the date they entered the program. Finally, Student Status Change forms were mined to identify given reasons for departure.

Plan of Action

Several interventions were explored and a plan of action was developed. First, a late student orientation was developed and deployed. Any student who enrolled between 3 days before term start and 2 days after term start was considered a late enrollment. Faculty were notified via e-mail and asked to call the student and conduct a scripted orientation with several goals. Students would 'meet' their professor and understand how and who to contact, hopefully decreasing the feeling of isolation online students reputedly felt. The platform features and syllabus requirements were explained. Strategies for how to approach the first week's work without a textbook were developed. Instructors then followed up with notification to the dean of completion of the late student orientation.

The general new student orientation was revised. Core faculty from each program, the instructional designer, and representatives from admissions collaborated on developing the new

orientation. Among other new features, students were introduced to their advisors and department chairs in the revised orientation with the goal of creating a "small school" feel and reducing isolation.

Week one and week four calls were implemented. Faculty were given a call log. They imported students' names and phone numbers into the log and called each student the first week of class. The instructor introduced him or herself, asked salient questions to get to know to know the student, and explained course requirements and features. Students were again called week four, the point at which some students typically began to lag behind in the course. Call logs were sent to the dean after week one and week four.

Some classes were revised to make the first week book independent and less demanding. Many students were not getting their textbooks until part way through the first week due to ordering books late and/or mishaps with the bookstore or shipping services. Late textbook arrival created a challenge from which some students could not recover and the course revisions were an attempt to minimize this disadvantage.

Weekly advisor training meetings shifted in focus. Previously, advisors would bring at risk student case studies into the meetings for problem solving. Last date of attendance reports were generated from the online course room interface listing students who had not logged into their courses within 6 days. The reports were e-mailed weekly to faculty and advisors. Faculty were required to call or e-mail students on the report, and communicate the student status to the dean. The revision involved sending the report out a day earlier, then reviewing the report during the meeting, student by student. More information was shared and advisors were tasked to follow up with individual students and problem solve.

A new course room menu item, called KUGSCAE, was developed by the instructional designer and a senior faculty member. This page was linked within the course home to an online site with numerous resources to help students be successful. Some of the resources, like the library, were previously in the course room. Others, like access to the Writing Center, were newly integrated into the

resource. The Writing Center resources provided students with access to much needed writing remediation. The overall design of KUGSCAE simplified use and maintenance.

An APA course was developed and all students were enrolled. The APA course was a resource useful in three primary ways. First, students could ask APA questions within the course and receive an answer within 24 hours. Second, students who were deficient in scholarly writing or proper citation technique could complete the one week course curriculum, facilitated by one of the faculty. The students could repeatedly return to the course resources for reinforcement. Lastly, students could be directed to specific resources within the APA course when deficiencies were identified.

Many faculty were deeply involved in the problem identification and solution development. Other faculty, full time and adjunct, local and remote, required socialization to accept fully the interventions developed.

Data Analysis and Results of Action Plan

Analysis

At risk student identification is challenging at the graduate level. Students with an undergraduate GPA less than 2.7 are at risk, as are those with poor writing and critical thinking skills. Students who are unfamiliar with APA conventions are at risk. Some students have financial, work or family crisis that put them at risk; and, regardless of the intervention, they must leave their educational dreams behind. Finally, students who leave the program are at risk, but many times their departure is the first indication of their status.

Analysis of Student Status Change forms revealed that 51% of the students left the program due to dismissal. Eighteen percent of the students left the program for financial reasons. One percent left for health or family crisis and one percent left because the program was too difficult. Thirty-nine percent of the students left for unknown or miscellaneous reasons.

Seventy five percent of the students with undergraduate GPAs less than 2.7 left the university by the end of their first semester. Further, students in general left at a much higher percentage in their first

semester. First semester drops accounted for 58% of the students leaving in the first term of 2010, 40% of the students leaving in the second term, and 25% of the students leaving in the third term. The trend moved in a positive direction due to intensive and continuous interventions employed.

Treatments or interventions were focused on remediating the identifiable issues students communicated before their departure and on creating a sense of community among students to help them succeed and persist.

Treatments

Eight different treatments were deployed to increase student persistence and success. Those treatments were: late student enrollment orientations, redesigned new student orientation, week one and week four calls, week one course revisions, revised focus of advising meetings to retention meetings, integrating KUGSCAE into all courses, developing and enrolling all students into an APA course, and changing faculty culture to one of retention and ownership for student persistence. Only primary treatments or interventions will be discussed.

Late Student Enrollment Orientation

Prior to the drop analysis, late student enrollment retention was not tracked. However, anecdotal evidence and Student Status Change forms review suggested that some students who enrolled late did not complete their first class. One of the action plan interventions was the late student enrollment orientation. In May, sixteen students enrolled between 3 days before term start and 2 days after term start, registering in 20 classes. Instructors received e-mail requests to conduct late student orientations. Seventeen late student orientations were conducted by faculty. To date, none of the students who received personal phone calls and late orientations from their instructors had departed the program.

Week One and Week Four Calls

Best practices in online education suggested that calling students in their first week of enrollment resulted in increased student persistence. Instructor calls to students would increase a sense of affiliation and overcome, to some extent, the feeling some students have of not being qualified for graduate work.

Call logs were provided and instructors were directed to send their call annotated logs to the dean in the second week of class.

Calling students was met with some resistance. Many faculty embraced the idea and carried out the calls with extremely positive results. A few teachers were passively defiant, calling in the middle of the day when the working adult student population was at work. Overall, 88% of the teachers completed and submitted call logs for week one.

Some students were effusive in their pleasure at faculty outreach, saying things like "I knew I chose the right graduate school!" In some cases problems were identified and resolved through the calls. One student related that he started late the previous term and never felt comfortable with the course room or the program. He was evaluating whether or not he was in the right place. The instructor walked him through the features of the course room and explained the syllabus and course progression. By the end of the call, he seemed relaxed and confident.

Retention Meetings

Prior to the change in focus to one of retention, advisors met weekly with the dean for training and student problem solving. The advising meetings became retention meetings. Based on the formula for early intervention, students who had not logged into the course room for six days were pulled from the online course room through a database management program and reported on a spreadsheet called a Last Date of Attendance Summary (LDA Summary). During weekly retention meetings, each student on the LDA Summary was discussed. An advisor either reported on the student's progress and the group problem solved, or an advisor was tasked to contact the student to see what type of assistance or perhaps motivation was required. This shift in focus to one of action made a tremendous difference. Through April, May, and June the number of students on the LDA Summary decreased by 28%.

Culture of Retention

For a retention action plan to work, the culture of retention needed to be shared by all faculty and staff within the university. This change in culture was communicated by sharing the distressing retention

trends with the faculty and staff, then involving everyone in the problem solving. During a faculty meeting in early April, data was analyzed, ideas were brainstormed, and best practices were adopted. Population trends including number of students in each degree program, number of new students each term by program, number of new students who dropped each month, number of students by program who dropped, and graduates each term were displayed on a board in the graduate school offices. All faculty and staff could easily see the progress made toward retaining students and, most importantly toward graduation.

Persistence Data

More students left the program during the first month of every term: January, March, and May. Students left after they finished a class naturally, and students were dismissed from the program during those months resulting in an expected higher drop percentage. The following chart describes the percent change by month. Using Fall 2009 attrition figures as a baseline, changes in drop percentages by month were calculated.

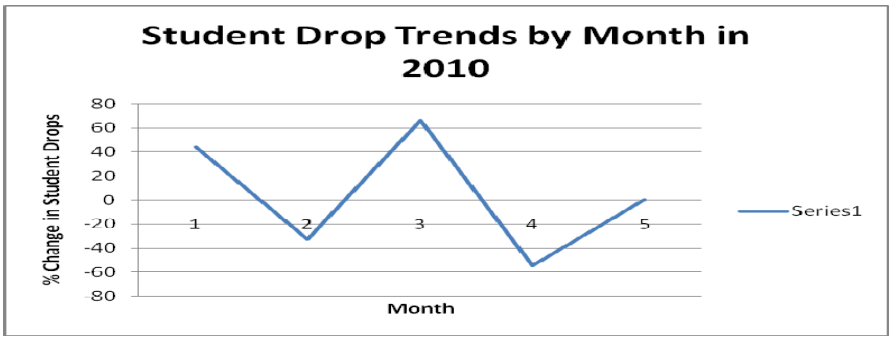

Figure 1. Student drop trends by month.

In January, the percentage of drops increased by 44% over Fall, 2009. In February the percentage of student drops was 33% lower than Fall, 2009. By March the percentage increase topped 66%. April trended down by 55% followed by May which showed no change in drop percentage when compared to Fall, 2009. After an initial and alarming increase in student departure over the first three months of 2010, dramatic improvement was shown. Comparing the first three months of 2010 to the second three months, a 47% decrease in student departure was realized.

Summary and Conclusion

Eight interventions were developed and applied to the MSE program and the graduate school in general. The results were a satisfactory decline in the number of students leaving the university. Seidman (2005) recommended early, continuous, and intensive intervention to prevent at-risk students from leaving their degree program. However, identification of at-risk students is difficult at the graduate level. Consequently, multiple interventions were developed and deployed, not necessarily focused on at-risk students, but on all students.

Multiple treatments were applied at the same time. It is impossible to conclusively assess which treatments were most effective. Late student enrollment orientations clearly were effective. Week one phone calls, course redesign to be book independent in the first week, and new resources like KUGSCAE and the APA course were undoubtedly effective, at least in terms of student satisfaction and learning. Retention meetings could not be discounted as an effective treatment, as students who began to drift were immediately contacted by their advisors. A 28% decrease in the number of students on the LDA Summary and, more importantly, a 47% decrease in the number of students leaving the university both were the result of the infusion of a culture of retention. The result is a transparent, measurable commitment to student success, shared by all administrators, faculty, and staff. The retention and program completion of online nontraditional students is critical to job placement after graduation, institutional profitability, and ultimately the stability of the national economy.

Recommendations for future research include the application of one treatment, such as week 1 and week 4 phone calls, measured over time for effectiveness. Another possibility is the implementation of the faculty/mentee model. In addition, implementation and tracking of cohorts, with 4 to 6 members, over time would provide valuable data regarding the effectiveness of scheduling practices. Although many options for research exist, knowing who our students are and taking the time to “place students first” is an effective first step in retention of nontraditional students.

References

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2010). *Learning on demand. Online education in the United States, 2009.* The Sloan Consortium.

Bean, J. P. (2005). Nine themes of college student retention. In A. Seidman (Ed.). *College student retention,* pp. 215-241. Westport, CT : Praeger Publishers.

Coley, C., & Coley, T. (2010). *Retention and student success. Staying on track with early intervention strategies.* Malvern, PA: SunGard Higher Education.

Craig, D. V. (2009). *Action research essentials.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

Kotter, J. (1996). *Leading change.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Kuh, G. (2003). What we're learning about student engagement from NSSE. *Change, 35*(2), 24-32.

Ormrod, J. (2008). *Human learning.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Seidman, A. (2005). *College student retention.* Westport, CT : Praeger Publishers.

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Tinto, V. (2001). *Rethinking the first year of college.* Higher Education Monograph Series, Syracuse University.

Tinto, V. (2006/2007). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *J. College Student Retention, 8*(1), 1-19.

Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation. (2008). *Engaging faculty and staff. An imperative for fostering retention, advising, and smart borrowing.* Author.