Community Colleges: Why Dropout Rates are Increasing and Options to Increase Retention Rates

Over the past five years, community college dropout rates have increased forty-five percent. This rising statistic worries college boards as they develop ways to increase student retention. Student population varies greatly within community colleges, and board members are troubled with suggestions to retain these diverse groups on campus. Not only is diversity an ongoing problem, but inflection points among students are an issue as well. Inflection points are defined as problems that students face. With these serious issues throughout community colleges, how do board members persuade students to continue their education? Reportedly, self-motivation plays a big role in determining whether students will continue the path of earning a degree. Contact systems and remedial curricula similarly comfort students by having peers and advisors who help keep students working and in the loop. In addition, students must also be involved physically; extracurricular activities are another way to involve students in their surroundings and help keep them connected to their goals. It is clear that the community college population faces obstacles in remaining successful, but with help from self-determination, peers and advisors or instructors, and involvement with the college, students can succeed at earning their degree.

Community colleges everywhere have very diverse populations. One source reports of the many groups of students now attending college: “According to the Open Doors report, in the 2013-2014 academic year, U.S. colleges and universities have attracted a record number of 886,052 students from all over the world” (Zhang). The community college population specifically is filled with people from
different cultures that range from older members of the community, students not looking for a four-year commitment, or people going into a trade. The older people in the community are looking for a way to go back to school and community college is a simple, affordable way for them to start their education again. Gail Markle reports, “One third of American undergraduate students enrolled in 2011 were considered nontraditional students as defined by the single criterion of age being 25 years and older” (267). This diverse population is on the rise. Community college is also a great alternative to starting out at a four-year college, especially for those who cannot afford the tuition of a university. Students wanting to pursue a trade might also attend a community college because it is an affordable way to get a two-year degree, making the transition into a job easier. Two-year universities are easily the best choice for all sorts of people wanting to continue their education past a high school degree, and thus the inclusion of such diversity creates the variance in the student population.

The transition from high school to college is never easy, even for community college students; no matter which university students may pick, they will always encounter inflection points. When thinking about inflection points, most people refer to them as obstacles students face. These obstacles interfere with students’ ability to graduate with a college degree. In terms of actual completion, “U.S. Census data indicate that in 2010, only 38% of 25 to 34-year old adults possessed college degrees (including both associate and bachelor degrees)” (Cox). This surprising statistic illustrates the prevalence of obstacles. Two examples of inflection points are failing grades and time management skills. Students taking multiple classes have many assignments, and the inability to complete work and the instances of getting behind in classes results in failing grades. The possible outcome of a failing class grade is not passing the class required for obtaining a specific degree. Time management also affects these students in many different ways. A report done by Giancola, et. al notes several ways time
management inflicts problems on students: “Nontraditional students experience four types of interrole conflict: family-school (family demands make it difficult to meet school demands), school-family (school demands make it difficult to meet family demands), work-school (work demands make it difficult to meet school demands), and school-work (school demands make it difficult to meet work demands” (qtd in Markle 270). Not knowing how to navigate time can certainly put a strain on students and cause them to drop out of school to take care of other business. Inflection points are growing rapidly in students’ educational goals, and without solutions to these obstacles, students are most likely to drop out of college.

One way to increase student retention and help students over these obstacles is to teach students how to become interested in their assignments. Diligent and self-driven students reach success easier than students who do not put forth the same effort, so people earning degrees must be motivated to stay on the right track and not give up easily. One statement from a study done in 1988 states, “Confidence is an important intrapersonal factor in student success” (qtd. in Markle 270). Students must have the willpower to stay focused on their assignments even though everyone else might be going out to have fun. Without an individual drive, students are less likely to succeed than those who possess that characteristic. During his interview with Marcie Craig, John Guthrie says, “…[S]tudents need motivation to comprehend texts more deeply than ever before. They have to believe in themselves to sustain their investment of effort. Kids who are interested in what they are learning work harder…”

Teaching people to become diligent with their work helps students put forth the effort required to complete their assignments. When students obtain an individual drive to work hard and stay motivated, they become determined to set goals and reach success.

Along with being interested in their work, students must also learn how to connect with others on campus to develop a support system. The use of contact systems within community colleges is crucial
to students ability to seek help when deciding whether or not to continue education. Group chats and teacher sessions are two examples of contact systems used in colleges. A group chat with classmates is a useful tool when taking difficult classes. Chats are great for class discussions and partner assignments outside of the classroom. One source discusses, “The discussions let [students] get to know their peers, discuss the content in ways they had not done in other online courses, and get feedback from [the professor] for anything their peers could not help resolve” (Curtis). Online or text discussions create better understandings of unclear assignments and let students help one another. Another use of contact systems is assigned time with professors. Many professors have study sessions outside of regular class time during the week. Students can take full advantage of these sessions as they prepare for quizzes and tests. When answering a survey about needs to aid in support systems, “participants offered numerous suggestions: expand course offerings, improve student advising, and increase access to faculty members” (Markle 279). When professors offer help through study sessions and varied office hours, students automatically feel better about their work. Through the help of contact systems with classmates and teachers, students are better prepared for their classes and are more likely to continue with their education.

Another option to help students earn their degree is to offer remedial curricula. Students take these remedial classes if they are not up on the skills needed for higher level classes. Gianeschi states, “[F]ederal statistics show 19 percent to 26 percent of all college freshmen are identified as needing remedial courses. That figure is lower on four-year campuses and rises as high as 60 percent for some two-year schools.” This curricula offers students a chance to choose the class that fits their level of ability. The professor has a one-on-one connection with students allowing them an easier understanding of assigned tasks. The students start where they feel most comfortable; if the student does not feel comfortable starting in a more difficult class, he can choose a lower-level class that allows him to build
his skills. Remedial curricula is a great way to retain college students because they feel wanted and have a better understanding of class expectations.

Becoming more involved with extracurricular clubs is another way to increase student retention. Students must focus on their classes, but they also need time to enjoy themselves, and connecting with a school both academically and socially will help keep students there. One researcher notes, “Further, Tinto (193) explains that involvement is necessary for integration into the college environment, and integration increases the likelihood of persistence” (Chang). Offering clubs helps students stay active in events around campus and allows them the have a say in what happens. Clubs and organizations like Student Government Associations and honor societies make students feel important enough to make a difference. Students will continue their studies because they feel a sense of entitlement that comes along with playing an important role in what goes on at their community college. The clubs build students’ resumes as well. They give the students leadership abilities and opportunities to meet people in their work force. Extracurricular clubs, with the help of adding student input about campus, gives students a reason to come back and continue their education.

Students are offered many opportunities at succeeding to complete their degree despite the obstacles that may occur. The varying population offers college diversity; however, this characteristic does not keep colleges from retaining their students in ways they see fit. Students have to understand what inflection points are and how to overcome these difficult situations. Self-motivation plays a huge role in college retention; students have to set goals and have enough self-control to finish their work so their grades do not drop. Also, colleges that use different forms of contact systems help students become involved with peers in the classroom and make them feel welcomed. Colleges that offer remedial classes, furthermore, make it easy for students to feel welcomed as well; students are able to choose the classes that fit their skill level. With the use of extracurricular clubs, colleges have also
created a way to keep students socially involved. Community colleges face diverse problems in helping students succeed, but with help from students themselves and the college programs provided, students can earn their degree successfully.
Works Cited


