Retention: How are we doing?
What do we know?
by Dr. Jack Williamsen, Data Analyst
Office of Institutional Effectiveness

In the fall of 2011, the OIE published the latest in its monograph series, Improving Retention at St. Norbert: Past, Present, & Possible Future. This monograph was the OIE’s second on retention. A Retention Album: Retention and Persistence at St. Norbert College, published in 2006, was the first. It summarized knowledge about SNC student retention, and activities for its improvement, made under the College’s Title III grant initiated in 2001-2002.

The 2011 monograph updated OIE retention research from 2006 to 2011 and provided the outline of a possible College-wide retention plan based on that research. As it turned out, the timing of the monograph was serendipitous. Academic year 2011-2012 saw numerous activities and initiatives directed toward improving retention. The formation by the College of the “Retention Action Group” (focused on short-range interventions with individual “at risk” students) and the “Retention Strategy Group” (tasked with formulating an overall strategic plan for improving retention) were major highlights. In addition, consultants from Performa, a higher education consulting group with expertise in retention, met with relevant SNC personnel on several occasions to explore short- and long-term retention strategies.

The increased emphasis on retention-related activities last year was matched by a corresponding increase in OIE retention research. The purpose of this article is to provide a summary of our recent findings for Assessment News readers. They have previously been shared with administrators responsible for, or associated with, SNC’s commitment to improve student retention. (Continued on Page 2)

Retention Action Committee Success Stories
by Dr. Corday Goddard,
Associate Dean of Student Development

The Retention Action Committee began meeting in October of 2011, a leaner, more aggressive version of the “30 Minute” Group that had met for a number of years. It became our mission to
1. Identify individual students at risk, and determine effective strategies to connect them with resources that address that risk.
2. Develop protocols and practices for the effective collection, use, and analysis of data that have a direct, measurable impact on student retention.
3. Serve as an integral part of the College’s efforts to achieve a 90% first year retention rate.

Over the past 12 months, there have been a number of times that faculty and other staff have collaborated with members of the Retention Action Committee to intervene with students who have put themselves at risk academically. In several situations, students had essentially quit attending class, and were on the brink of failing. We were able to get the student to come in and speak with me, during which time I was able to reinforce the gravity of the situation and to help the student problem-solve an approach. In many of those cases, the student knew what needed to happen, but grew more and more reluctant to meet with the professor.

Several times I was able to work with students to develop a simple, short-term plan (e.g. “I will go see my instructor during their office hour within the next 24 hours, and then will let you know I’ve done so.”) that resulted in their actually initiating a necessary but too-long-deferred conversation. (Continued on Page 4)
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Our emphasis will be on first-to-second year retention. It is widely known that the majority of students not retained to graduation leave between the freshman and sophomore years—true for SNC, true for institutions of higher education nation-wide. To get more graduates, retain more freshmen.

How are we doing?

In the fifteen years between 1997 and 2011, SNC’s freshman-to-sophomore retention has been between 80%-85%—with two exceptions; 85.4% in 2002 and 88.2% in 2004. There has been no discernible trend in the percentage of first year students retained over this period, although year-to-year volatility has increased in the most recent years.

There is a lot we don’t know hidden behind our first year retention rate. We don’t yet have clear answers about why retention has been more volatile recently, why SNC was able to go higher than 85% retention with the classes of 2002 and 2004, why we don’t punch through the 85% ceiling more often, or what factors most contribute to the long-term stability of our five percentage point “retention zone.” But we do know that, to change the goal of improving our graduation rate, the College needs to consistently breach the 85% retention ceiling.

What do we know?

The OIE website has a ‘data attic’ http://www.snc.edu/oie/documents.html?d=/Retention_Studies where numerous retention reports, tables, and charts from the past 11 years are accessible. Here we will highlight a selection of our most recent findings. These findings are derived from the combined entering student cohorts of 200810FF, 200910FF, and 201010FF. This three year “pool” uses the same pre-entrance information the College provided Performa for their SNC PowerAlert Retention Prediction model for 2011.

Pre-Entrance Factors affecting Retention:

- Financial variables, particularly the amount of loan taken by an entering student, had the greatest effect on subsequent retention for the three most recent retention cohorts. Our highest risk students (based on academic variables and, in some cases, diversity status) comprise one of the subgroups with the greatest debt load—clearly offering them some major challenges. Unmet need is another important financial predictor. Students with HSGPAs < 3.00 [see below] have the most loan and unmet need.

- HSGPA and ACT COMP continue to be useful pre-entrance predictors of subsequent retention. These classic predictors can be somewhat overshadowed by the impact of financial factors, but are definite “must keep” variables in retention analyses. We have long-known, for example, that students who enter with HSGPAs of less than 3.00 retain below our overall retention average of around 80%-85%. For the combined cohorts, reported here, retention was 67% for the one-fifth of entering students with HSGPAs < 3.00.

One more thing: about 20% of entering students do not provide us with FAFSAs, the necessary gateway into the College’s ability to evaluate the importance of student finances on retention. And not all entering students submit ACT results (although SAT scores submitted can be converted to an ACT COMP equivalent). But everyone has to submit HSGPA information. That makes it our universal “go to” pre-entrance predictor.

First Semester Academic Variables affecting Retention:

- The College has had a Midterm Evaluation (MTE) program since the early 1970s. The time period during which an instructor can submit a “Midterm” has expanded in recent years, suggesting that the term “Early Warning” may more accurately describe the nature and intent of the program. For this article, we will continue to use the convenient abbreviation “MTE” to describe the unofficial grades voluntarily submitted by instructors before a final grade.

Earlier research by the OIE indicated the significant impact of an MTE of “F” on subsequent retention. This finding was re-affirmed with the recent three-year combined cohort. Only 64% of first year students who received an MTE of “F” returned for the next year, compared with 85% of those without a failing MTE. So, how many students are assigned such an MTE anyway? In this combined cohort, about 14% received an MTE of “F.”

Most students with an MTE of “F” are likely to drop or fail the course in question; a few will pass with a “C,” or lower, passing grade. Those who drop or fail a course are now in a “make-up” situation, with negative scheduling and financial implications for their future at SNC. Further, it is likely that student academic self-confidence (a positive predictor of retention, by the way) and morale are diminished. We don’t know how parents generally view such an inauspicious beginning to an academic career at St. Norbert, but their perception is unlikely to be positive. Thus a failing MTE is a significant “red flag,” a solid at-risk indicator that merits attention.

- If an MTE of “F” is a risk indicator, what about actual credits attained—or lost—by first semester’s end? Students who “lost” first semester credits (i.e., registered for—but did not finally obtain—them) suffer from attrition significantly greater than those who do not. Only 63% of students from our recent three year combined cohort who lost more than four credits returned the following year. Students loosing 2-4 credits had a 76% rate of retention; those losing less than two credits were retained at 87%.

- We know that HSGPA is a predictor of retention. This precursor of actual college GPA is a solid and consistent pre-entrance predictor of academic success and retention. However, once students take courses, their college GPAs
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are better indicators. [Note: the average drop from HSGPA to first semester SNC GPA is about 0.5 points. The average HSGPA of the 2008-2010 cohorts, for example, was 3.40; the average first semester SNC GPA was 2.92].

The retention rate for the 2008-2010 freshmen with first semester SNC GPAs greater than 2.83 (about 60% of cohort members) was 90%. Students in the same cohort with SNC GPAs between 2.82 and 1.95 were retained at about 80%, while only 49% of those with first semester GPAs lower than 1.95 returned sophomore year. Of course this last group (9% of the total cohort) entered their second semester on academic probation, raising legitimate questions about longevity.

- Which first semester academic variable is more important for retention to sophomore year—credits earned or GPA? Credits earned is the better predictor, at least for this 2008-2010 combined cohort. But GPA makes a difference within credits-earned clusters. At the high end, where 8% of the cohort earned more than 16.00 credits, GPA added nothing to an understanding of the 95% retention of this cluster. Similarly, at the low end (students earning less than 12 credits in the first semester), where that cluster retention rate was 52%, GPAs obtained offered no further differentiation of retention status.

Not so for the two middle clusters that are based on first semester credits earned. The higher of the two middle clusters (with 70% of the total cohort), earning 12.5-16 credits, had an overall retention rate of 86%. The within-cluster subgroup with a GPA of 3.18 or higher was retained at a 91% rate. The subgroup with GPAs from 1.95 to 3.17 had an 84% retention rate; only 61% of those with GPAs less than 1.95 returned as sophomores.

In the lower of the two middle clusters (essentially the 14% of the cohort with 11.5-12 credits) differences in GPA once again yielded three subgroups. Freshmen with first semester GPAs of 2.83 or above returned at an 86% rate. The retention rate was 76% for those with a GPA between 1.95 and 2.82, while only 52% of the 24 students in the subgroup with GPAs less than 1.95 returned as sophomores at SNC.

Implications for Retention-related Activities

- The financial and academic variables discussed above do not exhaust the pool of retention predictors. OIE research, using the Freshman Survey, SNC's Current Student Survey, and Exit Surveys completed by students leaving SNC, has shown that “soft” variables, as varied as student satisfaction with courses and majors, choice of an academic major itself, alcohol consumption, and just simple overall satisfaction with the College experience at SNC, are statistically-reliable predictors of retention.
- It is not a lack of knowledge that has made it difficult (thus far) for the College to breach the 85% retention ceiling. Rather, we have yet to figure out how to effectively and systematically use the information we currently possess to initiate a coordinated set of interventions that have reasonable potential to work. The good news is that the Retention Strategy Group and Retention Action Group represent serious efforts by the College to do just this.
- St. Norbert is not unique in its desire to improve retention. The majority of higher education institutions have the same goal, and some of them have had success in turning desire into actuality. The College can tap these “best practices” as an additional source of information in the development of a comprehensive research-based Retention Plan that has College-wide commitment.
- Using the resources of the Retention Action and Strategy Groups, and combining them with retention information from inside and outside the College, clearly increases the probability we will make significant progress in the improvement of first year retention. This is an important institutional goal, and one that is within reach.

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Retention Action Committee Success Stories

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In other situations, faculty were able to work with me to problem-solve, and together we developed a strategy that the faculty member could employ. Often this involved a particular of reaching out to the student, or a way of inviting the student into further discussion. On a number of occasions, residence hall staff and others have reached out to individuals more casually, offering support and assistance where needed, putting a friendly, human face on the concept of “communio” that distinguishes us as the world’s only Norbertine college.

There were still other situations where the student would not, or perhaps felt they could not, do the things necessary to be successful in a given class or classroom situation. In some of those instances, I was able to talk with the faculty about the developmental value of failure or with the student about how to navigate and grow from these bumps along their academic road.

There has also been a great deal of collaboration between the Office of International Education and the Retention Action Committee. There was an occasion last year when we were able to meet with an international student who was doing poorly, and work together to help problem-solve her academic and other issues.

While the Retention Action Committee will never be able to save every student who puts her/himself at risk, we are help-
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ing put a significant number back on track to academic success. Using benchmarks developed in collaboration with OIE, we have been able to intervene early in the semester for some students and monitor others. In fact, of all the students we reached out to last year, 89 returned to SNC this fall.

The Committee believes that any admitted student has the ability to succeed at St. Norbert College. We have a caring, supportive faculty as well. Working together the Committee and involved faculty can increase the number of success stories in the future. Let me know when you think a student may need assistance. I can be reached at x1351.

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Retention Action Plan and Retention Strategies
by Dottie Stepien, Special Assistant to the Vice President for Enrollment Management and Communication

St. Norbert College has identified improved retention of students as an important institutional goal. The third strategy under the third SNC Strategic Plan domain, “Enroll, retain and graduate outstanding students, commits the College to “Achieve and maintain a freshman-to-sophomore retention rate of 90 percent.”

To achieve this goal, several actions have already been put into motion. In 2010-11 a comprehensive Retention Action Plan was developed. Nine goals and benchmarks focus on high-achieving students, domestic students from diverse backgrounds, first year students with an undecided major, first generation students, academically underprepared students, transfer students, international students, male students, and students with high financial need. Three additional goals were designed to enhance services and service delivery to students.

The college purchased a predictive modeling tool called “Power Alert” by Credo. Based on a number of variables, the software evaluates the likelihood of persistence of based on prior data. In 2012 three years of data were used to calculate a “Power Alert” value for each first year student. This value is used to proactively provide services to students in need of assistance. In 2012-13, the college will enhance this process with an additional system called Pharos 360.

In addition, two groups were established during the 2011-12 academic year to begin to improve the retention rate. The Strategic Retention Group, consisting of the Vice Presidents for Mission and Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, and Enrollment Management and Communications, the Associate Vice President of Enrollment, and the Assistant Dean for Student Development, meets monthly. This group focuses on short and long-term retention plans and programs, making data-driven decisions that will assist in achieving improved retention. They report findings and recommendations to the President’s Cabinet and to the Enrollment Management Committee.

The Retention Action Committee is made up of members from Student Affairs, Housing, Counseling, Enrollment Management and Academic Affairs. This group meets weekly and provides immediate intervention to help students who are struggling academically, socially, or financially as situations arise. They track intervention outcomes and share general results with the Strategic Retention Group.

Additional examples of action steps implemented from the Retention Action Plan include:

• Seventy-eight honors students are now in a living/learning unit in Bergstrom Hall with special programming offered.
• A Multicultural Student Center has been established on campus.
• The STAR Program has been in operation for three years with excellent retention results.
• Programming with the Admissions/Athletic Department has been initiated.
• Undecided majors are now scheduled for a session in Career Services early in their freshmen year. Major fairs are held early in the year.
• A transfer student orientation was implemented in 2011 and a transfer satisfaction survey was conducted. As a result, a "Conditional/Directed Admission" tier was created for selected transfers enrolling in the Fall 2012 term.
• A transfer student section of Philosophy 120 was created as a "learning community" for transfers with 15 transfer students enrolled in the course.
• A fund was established to provide emergency assistance for students with great financial need.
• Students and advisors can ask the Director of Advising questions directly via the Advisement website.
• Several enhancements to student services have occurred including “Ask SNC”.
• Housing staff have received additional training related to retention factors.
• A "one-stop" student service center has been created in Todd Wehr Hall.
• The optimum enrollment process redefined and provided additional detail for the College’s annual retention goals through 2017.