ASSESSMENT NEWS

This is the First of Two Major Issues on Retention. Look for the Next One Early Next Semester.

Student Retention in Context: Our Experience at St. Norbert
By: Jack Williamsen

Why the concern about retention?
In the not-so-distant past, some institutions of higher education took pride in low rates of retention to graduation. A low rate of retention was viewed as a sign of academic rigor, a signal that faculty were willing to weed out the academically unfit with stringent criteria for successful course completion, leaving only a graduating class of students that met the academic standards of excellence set by the institution. This view assumed that the only reason students left college (or were asked to leave) was because they were unfit—academically or otherwise—for graduation.

A low rate of retention as an indicator of academic rigor is—at best—an unexamined assertion that “worked” only when (1) “open enrollment” in admissions was the primary admissions strategy, (2) a large pool of college-bound high school seniors existed, and (3) significant Federal and/or state financial support for higher education was much more abundant. Under these circumstances, replacement of students who left was not difficult.

The twin assumptions that students leave only because they are unfit and that low retention is desirable have been disproved by a considerable body of research. We now know students leave college for a variety of reasons—academic and nonacademic—many of which can be controlled by the institution, and that low rates of retention are antithetical to effective and efficient use of institutional resources.

The environment that made these assumptions popular does not characterize the circumstances in which colleges and universities find themselves in the first decade of the 21st century. On the contrary, the pool of college-qualified (and interested) high school seniors has become smaller, paralleled by reductions in public financial support of higher education. Given these reductions in potential applicants and public dollars, many colleges and universities have become selective, choosing freshman class applicants they believe are likely to remain to graduation. Retaining students for four years is demonstrably less expensive than replacing students who depart before graduation.

In this new environment of relative scarcity, a high retention rate suggests an institution has been successful in its initial selection of new students and in its post-matriculation support (financial, academic, co-curricular) of their academic careers. Of course, not every admitted student will—or should—graduate from her or his matriculating institution. The applicant screening process is imperfect and mistakes in matching student and institution are inevitable.

Further, the lives and fortunes of college students are as unpredictable as any others’. Things don’t always work out as planned—by either the student, the student’s parents, or the admitting college. Significant changes in family circumstances or the personal lives of students, for example, can make it impossible to remain in college. In addition, young adulthood is a time of great growth and development. A student’s interests, values, or goals may change in ways that are incompatible with continued enrollment at the college first entered.

Imperfect student selection, unforeseen changes in circumstances, and developmental changes occurring after entrance guarantee that retention of entering freshmen will be less than 100%. But these factors are not the only ones contributing to the determination of actual retention numbers. (Continued on Page 2)
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The curricular, co-curricular, and social environments of an institution affect continued enrollment as well. The myriad ways an institution interacts with its students can either support their continuation to graduation or the reverse.

Virtually all colleges and universities recognize they have a role in retention of their students that extends beyond careful selection. Services and programs such as academic advisement, first year experiences, living/learning environments, academic support services, learning communities for freshmen, health and counseling services, career services and a variety of co-curricular experiences are all designed to address the needs of currently enrolled students. Although rarely designed primarily to improve retention, such services and programs are intended to support students in ways that encourage their continuance to graduation.

The desire to retain students has led to a substantial body of applied research on what student and institutional characteristics are closely related to achievement of this goal. One clear result from this research is the discovery that ‘one college’s drop-out is another’s graduate.’ That is, many students who enter college do, indeed, obtain a degree, even if not from the institution they attended first. Such students do not really “drop out” of higher education; they merely attend more than one college or university on their journey from freshman to graduating senior. Thus, the current nomenclature speaks of student “departures” rather than “drop-outs.”

This change is not a bow to political correctness. Rather it reflects our new knowledge that the majority of students who enter higher education complete a degree (somewhere, sometime). It further reflects the recognition that retention of students is affected by institutional characteristics, not just student attributes—unlike “drop-out,” which implied that it was one or more personal limitations which led a student to leave, with characteristics of the enrolling institution playing no role in the event.

Below is a (partial) list illustrating factors empirically known to contribute importantly to the differing rates of retention among American colleges and universities. Note that the institutional characteristics shown are those that differentiate retention rates among or between different colleges and universities. They are most useful for understanding why retention at Institution A differs from the rate at Institution B. When trying to understand factors that influence retention rates at a single college or university, within-institution characteristics, such as academic major selected, membership in social groups, participation in service projects, satisfaction with major field curriculum, amount of financial aid received, diversity of the student body, type of residence, college GPA, and so on are much more relevant.

Keeping the above information in mind, here is what national findings tell us:

Student characteristics affecting retention include:

- Academic achievement in high school.
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Family socioeconomic status
- Reason(s) for attending college
- Satisfaction with choice of college

Inter-Institutional characteristics affecting retention include:

- Type (e.g., public, private, religious affiliation, single sex)
- Size of student body
- Selectivity in admissions.
- Proportion of students in residence.

Weighed against each other, somewhat more than two-thirds of the variation in degree completion rates among American institutions of higher education is associated with entering student characteristics, in contrast to institutional factors. One implication of this finding is that comparisons of institutional retention rates are likely to be misleading if the differing characteristics of admitted students are not recognized.

With the above as prologue, let’s look at retention at St. Norbert.

How well does SNC do on retention?

In the recent past, St. Norbert has graduated—on average—74% of its entering freshman classes. This graduation rate places us in a second place tie with St. Mary’s College (Indiana) when compared with our 53 other Midwest regional peers in the U.S. News & World Report 2005 Edition of America’s Best Colleges (we ranked fourth overall this year). The Midwest comprehensive college with the best retention rate was Taylor University (also Indiana), with a 79% retention rate.

Of course everything is relative, as the apocryphal saying attributed to Einstein goes. Harvard graduates 98% of its freshmen. College of the Holy Cross has an 89% retention rate, Marquette’s rate is 76%, and the University of Wisconsin (Madison) graduates 79% of its entering freshmen. So, how one judges St. Norbert’s retention depends to some extent on the other colleges or universities included in the comparison pool.

Or not. It is also reasonable to take a ‘comparisons-with-others-be-damned’ approach and judge our retention rate against only one set of standards—our own institutional goals or values—and measure our actual retention against the retention rate we say is desirable for St. Norbert. And, what is that rate? It has yet to be determined.

Realism plays a role in the determination, of course. Retention is significantly influenced by the characteristics of our entering students (as we saw above and shall see below) and by institutional resources (as we shall also see below). One or both of these may be significantly different from what would move us (Continued on Page 3)
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to our “ideal” rate of retention. We compete for students and for financial and human resources in the larger higher education marketplace, and the competition is Darwin-like tough.

Accepting the constraints placed on us by the current realities, whatever decision the College makes regarding an ideal graduation rate for matriculating students needs to take into clear account our institutional mission and identity. And it should reflect the highest ethical standards as well, emphasizing our commitment to supporting the worth and dignity of every individual student we accept for entrance.

Can we improve retention at St. Norbert?
To see just how feasible it is for SNC to improve retention, we first need to know what factors affect our graduation rates and then determine what resources we are willing to commit to increase factors which help and decrease the impact of those which hinder.

Our preliminary research on recent entering freshman cohorts is consistent with national research in showing that the best single predictor of graduation at St. Norbert is high school GPA. This is true for both transcript-derived and self-reported HSGPA (which are very highly correlated).

Look at the chart below. It shows the relationship between self-reported HSGPA and subsequent graduation from SNC. The information comes from over 1950 freshmen who entered SNC from 1990-1996 and completed the freshman survey (“CIRP”).

The chart shows a clear increase in the probability of graduating from St. Norbert as one moves from a HSGPA of “C” (38% graduation rate) through “A/A+” (88% graduation rate).

Readers with good memories will quickly recall that SNC’s graduation rate is about 74%, a rate that is exceeded by the subgroups of freshmen who enter the College with self-reported high school GPAs of “B+” or higher. It would seem we could instantly improve our retention rate (if that is desirable) simply by admitting only students from these subgroups.

Alas, that action is probably not possible. Students with those grades comprise about 65% of our entering freshman classes. We would have to increase that number from 65% to 100%. This increase is problematic. Here’s why.

College applicants with these grades are in finite supply and highly sought-after by all our competitors. Many will offer “top dollar” for the presence of such students on their campuses, a fact that does not go unnoticed by intellectually-capable students who are gratified by being the focus of ‘bidding wars.’

Even if we had access to an expanded pool of such applicants and possessed a correspondingly larger treasury of financial aid dollars to give them, there is no guarantee our retention would improve significantly. What if, for example, such a large cohort of bright, articulate students found their expectations for excellence in SNC resources—human and physical—not met? Given their academic records, they could easily transfer (fyi: the majority of our current departing students are in good academic standing when they leave).

All that said, there is no reason the College should not explore ways to improve the academic qualities of its entering freshman classes. Let’s just be realistic about it. And let us recall there are other student characteristics influencing retention of our students.

For example, our research to date has found statistically reliable predictive relationships between SNC graduation and the number of times an entering freshman reports she/he missed class as a high school senior or consumed alcohol (both negatively affecting the likelihood of graduation from St. Norbert). Conversely, entering freshmen who express the belief our graduates get good jobs are more likely to graduate. And, not surprisingly, freshmen who indicate even before their first SNC class they might transfer are indeed more likely to do so.

Purpose matters, too. About 80% of graduates from SNC indicated as freshmen that getting a good job was a “very important” reason for attending college compared to about 70% of student departures—a statistically reliable difference.

Freshmen who indicate their intended major is mathematics graduate at a rate about ten percent higher than the SNC average of 74%; perhaps these freshmen arrive with higher HSGPAs and/or seriousness of purpose than some of their
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peers. Students who indicate business administration is their major choice, by the way, are second to intended math majors in retention to graduation, with about an 80% graduation rate.

The list of student characteristics above is not exhaustive. It merely reflects our initial efforts to better understand the kind of student most likely to graduate from St. Norbert. There is much more waiting to be discovered here.

Aspects of the SNC environment

What about aspects of St. Norbert affecting retention of students once they enroll? Although we have just begun to explore this essential portion of the ‘retention equation,’ there are some interesting findings. There is evidence from at least the last year or so that the components of SNC’s financial aid packages have an impact on retention (Kevin Quinn will address this in an article in our next issue).

So does satisfaction with the major. Of students in good [academic] standing from the 2003-2004 enrolled cohort who completed the College’s annual Current Student Survey last year, 52% of those who returned indicated they were “very satisfied” with the academic quality of their major, vs. only 28% of those who left.

That statistic makes intuitive sense. Of equal interest is the less obvious finding that 16% of students in good standing who did not return this year indicated they were “uncertain” about the quality of their major program. This compares with about 6% of returning students.

It may seem surprising that a student would not have an opinion about how satisfied she or he is with the quality of her/his major. But a little reflection can generate a number of possible reasons this might be the case. Perhaps the student had only a very modest number of courses in their major of choice, not enough to convince her of its academic merits. Or, perhaps the uncertainty reflects some unanticipated disappointment with the major, leaving confusion in its wake. Or, maybe the uncertainty reflects a lack of focus on academics, some disengagement from the course of the higher education enterprise that leaves a student feeling marginal about remaining at St. Norbert, marginal enough to make leaving a probability.

Whatever the case, satisfaction with St. Norbert is an indicator of retention status. Last year, only 18% of those students in good standing who ultimately left said (on SNC’s Current Student Survey, completed in November) they were “very satisfied” with SNC. This compares with 45% of those who remained.

Conclusion

The institutional characteristics mentioned above, and their interactions with the characteristics of our entering students, are just a few pieces to the “retention puzzle.” We are gradually discovering the factors affecting retention of St. Norbert students. This process of discovery is interesting, but not as exciting as the integration of all relevant student and institutional characteristics into a meaningful series of portraits of “who stays, who leaves.”

Increasing our knowledge of environmental factors affecting retention of students who enter St. Norbert can probably be justified as an example of expanding institutional self-understanding. ‘Better to be informed than ignorant’ would seem to be good advice for an institution devoted to learning.

But, of course, this knowledge can be used for other purposes. It can inform budgetary planning, for example, and is an essential piece in “enrollment management.” Perhaps most importantly, our understanding of institutional factors which support retention can help us make improvements that better serve the students who come to St. Norbert and entrust us with their educational futures.

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Exploring the Unexpected: What Happened in 2003-04?

By: Jack Williamsen

Stimulated by an unexpected reduction in the number of 2003-04 enrolled students returning to St. Norbert this Fall, the topic of retention is now of central interest. Although we know a significant amount about the factors affecting retention of SNC students generally, the practical (e.g., budgetary) implications of last year’s ‘shortfall’ suggest a more detailed analysis of the 2003-04 enrolled student cohort is in order. Not only should this analysis provide reasons for our particular unexpected losses last year, it might also point toward variables affecting future retention.

What happened in 2003-04?

Our exploration (and explanation) of unexpected losses from the 2003-04 enrolled student cohort is not complete at this time. But at least the general outlines of what happened are clear. And the accompanying hypotheses to explain the “what” are plausible and empirically-supported, even if perhaps not conclusive or definitive (our investigations are ongoing).

As Exhibit 1 (appended) indicates, 86% of students from the 2003-04 enrolled cohort eligible to return in Fall\(^1\), 2004 did so. This compares with 89% and 88% of similar cohorts from 2002-03 and 2001-02.

Exhibit 1 shows that 14% of the 2003-04 cohort did not return. The majority (9%) were students in good standing. Two percent left with some sort of academic warning; three percent were dismissed. Each of these three groups was larger than their counterparts from the previous two years, so all contributed to the “shortfall” in returning students.

The impact of losses in the “good standing” group was most significant, since these students comprised the largest (146 students) subgroup of “departures.” The good standing subgroup is also interesting because their departures were not forced (as was true (Continued on Page 5)

\(^1\) The data in Exhibit 2 are derived from students who entered SNC with either “freshman” or “transfer” designations and who had less than 32 courses at the end of the academic year, i.e., they were “eligible” to return the following year to continue their studies. Demographic information on the 2001-02, 2002-03, and 2003-04 enrolled students cohorts is in Exhibit 2, appended.
Exploring the Unexpected: What Happened in 2003-04? (Continued from Page 4)

for the dismissed subgroup) or based on jeopardy (the academic warning subgroup). In that sense, students in good standing left “voluntarily,” although they may have had sound reasons for doing so.

What made attrition in the 2003-04 cohort a surprise?

The increase in attrition when compared to the previous two cohort years was unexpected, but the way the attrition occurred is surprising. Compared to cohort years ‘01-02 and ‘02-03, significantly higher attrition occurred during the second semester, up 19% from the average 2nd semester losses of the previous two years. Much of the attrition occurred among students in good standing, up 24% from 2nd semester losses in the two years prior to 2003-04. And, in this group of students, a surprising number of transfer students and students with more than 28 courses left.

The surprising rise in 2nd semester attrition of students in good standing complemented a rise in academic dismissals. This number (54) was over 40% greater than the average (38) of the previous two years. Taken together, academic dismissals and departures of students in good standing accounted for most of the unexpected attrition in 2003-04, a pattern that continued through the 3rd (summer) semester of that academic year (18 students lost vs. eight in each of the previous two summers).

Explaining 2003-04 attrition

One likely key to understanding the increased attrition of the 2003-04 enrolled student cohort is to recall when it became a surprise. The surprise occurred in the second and (to a lesser extent) 3rd academic terms. During the second semester, students were notified of increases in tuition and room and board. Annual announcements of this type are certainly not surprising, but the student response in 2003-04 seems to have been. Here is one explanation why.

Students who entered SNC as freshmen in 2001-02 have, in the past three years faced tuition increases of $1077, $988, and $1438—a total of $3503. Given the structure of financial aid at St. Norbert, these increases typically are either “absorbed” by students and their families, or managed with increased debt. In either case, the financial burden on most students increases.

Our analysis of the increase in 2003-04 attrition suggests that a combination of circumstances last year “conspired” to increase the sensitivity of students to the latest in a seemingly uneventful series of increases in the cost of attending St. Norbert. The announced increase in tuition was our highest ever. It was the latest in four increases, only one of which was (by $12) less than $1000. The increases occurred in a relatively noninflationary (national CPI) external environment where unemployment (or its threat) had been newsworthy for some time and the family incomes of many SNC students “flat,” or nearly so.

Who is vulnerable?

Who is most “at risk” to leave SNC when increases in tuition and fees are announced?

The obvious group is the one most affected by costs—those students whose ability to pay the costs of attendance is marginal. For them, another rise in cost may be the “last straw,” just the event that makes attendance at SNC something they can ill-afford.

But there are other students at risk, too, when cost rise, even if their financial situation is not as marginal. These are the students who, our research has shown, typically graduate at lower rates than peers. The list (for SNC) includes: students with relatively low GPAs, diversity students, transfer students, freshmen, sophomores, males, students with no major, students dissatisfied with their major, students requiring the assistance of Academic Support Services, students who did not make SNC their first choice of college, and so on. Although we did not explore the impact of financial factors on all these at-risk groups, we did confirm the differential impact of financial variables associated with class-in-school (freshmen affected most, juniors and seniors least) and selection of SNC as college of first choice (students not making SNC their 1st choice of college impacted more). Diversity students, too, appeared to be more “sensitive” to financial factors, as did transfer students.

For traditional at-risk students, a rise in cost is like taking away another handhold as they scale the mountain that is an SNC education. It weakens the resolve, provides another reason to quit, requires more commitment to continue. It may not be the only thing to trigger a departure, or even the main thing, but is one more thing. For some that will be enough, and they will add to the number of students who depart before they graduate from St. Norbert.

Factors related to retention In the analyses which follow, we included a large--but incomplete--number of variables demo nstrated to affect retention of SNC students. Our selection includes variables from three domains: student characteristics, institutional factors (academic), and financial information. The variables listed below all have an empirically-demonstrated relationship to retention at St. Norbert:

Student Characteristics:
High School GPA, ACT COMP, SNC student’s 1st choice, ethnic background, sex, and entrance to SNC as freshman or transfer.

SNC Characteristics (academic)
SNC GPA and number of SNC courses completed.

Financial Variables
Total family income, total aid, work/study income, loan amount, total grant amount, total SNC grant amount, unmet need, financial burden (loan + unmet need).

Some variables are more important than others

The variables above are not independent; many of them have relationships with companion variables (e.g., HSGPA and ACT COMP are related; total grant and SNC grant amounts are related).

It is helpful to know which variables from the lists above make statistically reliable independent contributions to the prediction (Continued on page 6)
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of retention when they are pitted against each other. For the entire enrolled student cohort of 2003-04 here are those variables, listed (from most to least) in order of predictive importance.

- SNC GPA
- SNC Grant
- Loan Amount
- ACT COMP
- HSGPA
- SNC 1st choice of college
- Family income
- Total Grant
- Financial burden
- Work/study income

These variables account for about 18% of the total variation in retention. Although apparently a small percentage (72% remains unexplained, after all), 18% is virtually “state of the art” in predictive retention studies of this type and suggests we have captured most of the easily accessible variables in our statistical net. The hunt continues for other important factors—student and institutional—that contribute to retention/attrition.

Although all the variables in the above list are important, SNC GPA is—by far—the major contributor. This finding is very consistent with what we know, both locally and nationally, about factors related to college student retention. One obvious reason is that institutions of higher education set minimum GPA standards which—if not met—make continuation and graduation impossible. But the relevance of GPA to retention continues (albeit with diminished importance) even when limited to students in good standing.

The domination of SNC GPA should not obscure the fact that the second variable on our list is SNC Grant. This is the most important financial variable, slightly greater in importance than loan amount. One might have expected the latter (or its cousins, unmet need and financial burden) to be most strongly associated with student departures from SNC. Instead, the amount of aid provided by SNC had the greatest impact on retention.

Students in good standing: what’s important?

Although retention of any student who has the potential and the desire to graduate from St. Norbert is important, retaining students in good standing would seem even more vital. Such students have demonstrated the ability to meet our academic standards, some of them doing so with very high levels of achievement. This group of students contains most of our very desirable future graduates. Retaining as many of them as possible should be a top priority.

What variable from the previous lists demonstrate independent predictive importance when limited to retention of students in good standing? Here, once again in order of predictive importance, are the “good standing” variables.

- SNC Grant
- SNC 1st Choice of College
- Family Income
- Work/study Income
- Courses completed
- Ethnic status (White vs. all Diversity)
- ACT COMP

Although there are some similarities between the list of predictor variables for the entire 2003-04 cohort and that limited to good standing students only, there are also differences. SNC GPA, for example, no longer dominates; it is not even in the good standing list. The failure of SNC GPA to appear on the good standing list may be due to “restriction in range” that occurred when only students with GPAs between 2.00 and 4.00 are in the analysis pool. But it may also signify the relative loss of independent predictive power when SNC GPA competes with the variables above and reinforces the general finding that not all students leave SNC before graduation because they are unable to meet our academic standards.

Note, too, that new variables appear in the good standing list. Total courses completed and ethnic status are included as predictors in the new list. Loan amount, total grant, and financial burden are not. For students in good standing, these variables do not make a statistically reliable independent contribution.

There is one other important observation about the good standing list. The list of predictor variables shrank from ten to seven, with a corresponding loss of the ability to account for variation in retention. The good standing variables account for only about 7% of total variation, compared with about 17% for the total student cohort variables. This reduction could well mean our initial exploration did not locate as many of the explanatory factors affecting retention of students in good standing as we did for the entire cohort. We will continue looking.

How do the important variables interact and combine to impact retention?

This is perhaps the most useful question to ask, since the answer(s) can help identify subgroups of students in good standing who were most sensitive to changes in their financial status. Our working hypothesis is that financial variables best account for the “bump” in good standing departures that occurred in the 2nd and 3rd academic terms last year. If so, subgroups of students most sensitive to these variables can become the focus of future efforts to improve retention.

The differential impact of SNC Grant on class in school

We begin with the most important variable, SNC Grant. For the entire good standing group, attrition was approximately 10% for 2003-04. But for students either with no SNC Grant or a grant less than $5000, the attrition was over 20%—double.

Students with SNC Grants between $5000 and $7000 departed at about a 15% rate. Once the SNC Grant reached at least (Continued on Page 7)
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$7000, attrition was at the entire group rate—about 10% . Students with SNC Grants over $9000 showed losses of just under 8%.

Conclusion: Size of SNC Grant is clearly associated with attrition—the higher the Grant, the less the attrition.

But wait. Although the lowest SNC Grant subgroup had overall losses of 20%, Total Courses Completed had a major impact within that subgroup. The College lost almost half (49%) of freshmen with grants less than $5000, and 26% of sophomores with the same grant. Only about 7% of juniors and seniors with SNC grants less than $5000 left. The combination of low (or no) SNC grant “enhanced” the normal vulnerability of freshmen and sophomores to attrition. See Exhibit 3 for a visual.

As the SNC Grant grew larger, attrition from all classes grew smaller. At the highest SNC grant levels (> $9000), freshman and sophomore losses were less than 8% below the overall average of 10%.

The differential impact of having SNC as college of 1st choice

Students in good standing who indicated SNC was their first choice of college, showed losses of about 9% last year, compared with just over 20% for students who did not select SNC as 1st choice. But even the “first choice” students were impacted by size of SNC Grant. Those with SNC Grants of less than $5000 left at about a 20% rate.

Working on campus helped retention of 1st choice students. Those with work/study income of more than $400, left at a 4% rate, compared with 13% for those with no work/study money.

Conclusion: Financial factors, particularly size of SNC Grant and Work/Study income, play a significant role in retention of our highest retention group, students for whom SNC is their 1st choice. One possible reason SNC Grant and SNC work/study earnings head our list of financial predictors for this group is that they help strengthen bonds between students and College. On-campus employment has been shown in national studies to be a positive contributor to retention, perhaps by increasing a student’s sense of belonging to the academic community. And, in our case, the amount of SNC Grant (the College’s own money) signals the strength of SNC’s desire to have a student join our community. Feeling wanted and needed are bonuses extending beyond the actual dollar amount of support.

What about transfer students?

Transfer students last year left at double (18% vs. 9%) the rate of students who entered SNC as freshmen. This “original enrollment” status did not make our list of essential predictor variables for either all enrolled students or those in good standing, even though it has a statistically-reliable association with retention status. But transfer students are worth a look, if only to begin an initial exploration of this overlooked group.

Not surprising given its overall importance, size of SNC Grant had a major impact on retention of transfer students, even more so than on those who entered as freshmen. Almost half (47%) of those who received no grant or a grant less than $5000 were not retained, compared with 9% of those with larger grants.

Overall conclusions

This analysis of attrition of the 2003-04 enrolled student cohort is not exhaustive, but it points to the important role played by size of SNC Grant awards in the attrition of students last year. SNC grant was not the only variable that affected retention of the enrolled student cohort. It interacted with “traditional” indicators of retention, such as year-in-school and the positive impact of selecting SNC as the first choice for college, exaggerating their salience.

It is true that financial variables other than SNC Grant are significantly related to retention of the 2003-04 SNC good standing cohort. These variables include family income, amount of indebtedness, and others listed earlier in this report. But, for students enrolled in 2003-04, SNC Grant showed the strongest relationship to retention and thus might well be central to a discussion of strategies intended to stabilize or improve retention of enrolled students.

In the next issue...

- Kevin Quinn explores the relationship between financial burden and attrition.
- An OIE analysis of exit survey data.
- Enrollment Management’s recommendations for improving retention.

ASSESSMENT RESOURCES

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Exhibit 1

Status of 2003-04 Enrolled Students

- Dismissed: 2%
- Left w/ ac. Warning: 3%
- Left in Good Standing: 9%
- Still Enrolled, Fall 2004: 86%

Status of 2002-2003 Enrolled Students

- Dismissed: 1%
- Left w/ ac. Warning: 2%
- Left in Good Standing: 8%
- Still Enrolled, Fall '03: 89%

Status of 2001-2002 Enrolled Students

- Dismissed: 1%
- Left w/ ac. Warning: 2%
- Left in Good Standing: 8%
- Still Enrolled, Fall '02: 88%
Office of Institutional Effectiveness

Exhibit 2

Students Enrolled during Academic Year 2003-2004

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent Female</th>
<th>Percent who entered as FR</th>
<th>Percent White Students</th>
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<td>58%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>93%</td>
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<td>Dismissed, 2003-2004</td>
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<td>33%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>94%</td>
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<td>Left w/ Academic Warning</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Left in Good Standing</td>
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<td>Total in 2003-2004 Cohort</td>
<td>1617</td>
<td>56%</td>
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Students Enrolled during Academic Year 2002-2003

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<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent Female</th>
<th>Percent who entered as FR</th>
<th>Percent White Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Still Enrolled, Fall, 2003</td>
<td>1441</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissed, 2002-2003</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left w/ Academic Warning</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left in Good Standing</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total in 2002-2003 Cohort</td>
<td>1624</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students Enrolled during Academic Year 2001-2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent Female</th>
<th>Percent who entered as FR</th>
<th>Percent White Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Still Enrolled, Fall, 2002</td>
<td>1463</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissed, 2001-2002</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left w/ Academic Warning</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left in Good Standing</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total in 2001-2002 Cohort</td>
<td>1660</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2003-04 Students in Good Standing

- Overall Attrition 10%
  - SNC Grant $0-$5000 Attrition: 20%
  - SNC Grant $5000-$7000 Attrition: 15%
  - SNC Grant $7000-$9000 Attrition: 10%
  - SNC Grant > $9000 Attrition: 8%
  - Freshmen Attrition: 49%
  - Sophomores Attrition: 26%
  - Juniors and Seniors Attrition: 8%
Transfer & Freshmen Transcript Analysis
Raise Questions

During the 2003-04 academic year, eighteen students who transferred to St. Norbert College left the College without graduating. Fifteen of the eighteen (83%) transferred to St. Norbert after attending another college for two or fewer semesters. All but five of the departing transfers (72%) were in good academic standing when they left. An analysis of departing transfers’ transcripts raises at least one interesting question about how we enroll transfers. More than 76% of the courses taken by departing transfers in their first two semesters at SNC were general studies courses. While this isn’t surprising given the nature and number of SNC general studies requirements, it may be problematic for transfers who have already invested a semester or more in meeting another institution’s general studies requirements. Heavy enrollment in general studies courses may also appear to forestall entry into their prospective major; a significant reason for transferring in the first place. Only seven of the 18 departing transfers were enrolled in a course in their major in their first semester at St. Norbert college. Do we need to rethink our general studies expectations for transfers?

During the same year, forty-one newly enrolled freshmen left the College in good standing (average GPA=2.72). On average, seventy percent of the courses they took were general studies courses (range = 25%-100%), but course enrollments were not evenly distributed across all areas. Twenty-nine of forty-one (71%) were enrolled in a Gs 8. Twenty-five (61%) in Gs 5. The fewest were enrolled in Gs 7 (29%) and Gs 4 (39%). The interesting finding is that 15 of the 29 (52%) enrolled in Gs 8 manifested some deficiency or difficulty in mathematics (e.g. enrollment in MT H02, course withdrawal, a final grade of CD or lower). This raises the question, is math proficiency an indicator of persistence for St. Norbert College? If so, do we need to give additional attention to student’s math competence in our admissions process?

North American Enrollment Management Institute
June 23 – 26, 2004

Attended by Dustin Thill, Associate Director of Admissions

The North American Enrollment Management Institute was hosted by Noel-Levitz; a national consulting firm to colleges and universities on enrollment management and related matters (retention, publications, financial aid). It was a follow-up to The National Conference on Student Retention that I attended last year with Jack Williamsen and Jeff Ritter. The majority of presenters were from institutions that had something to share about how they had increased their overall enrollment. They accomplished this through publications, financial aid practices, increases in overall retention, and shaping their incoming classes.

Impressions from the Institute

The number of things I took from the conference was overwhelming. Fortunately I took good notes and sat in the front row to prevent my attention from wandering. Here a few of the things stressed by participants.

1. Financial aid consistency is essential to maintaining and increasing retention rates and shaping a freshman class. Simply put, 1. the Financial Aid Office can help to make or break our potential for enrollment management success
2. Student experiences within the first two months of their college life are crucial in the effort to see them through to graduation.
2. Parents are a key element in the attempt to success fully retain students.

Application to St. Norbert College

1. St. Norbert College packages students consistently throughout their four years of attendance. This sounds good until you dig a little deeper. The problem lies in the financial gap between the student’s expected family contribution compared to the real cost of attendance at SNC. Most freshmen will come in with some gap; usually the gap is small enough so the student still enrolls. The problem is that this gap increases every year. While SNC costs are going up an average of 6% per year, financial aid stays the same with the exception of increases in the Stafford loan. Due to this, the gap continues to increase each year along with the necessity for the student to take on more debt in order to continue enrolling at SNC. For many families this increase proves too difficult to manage and they look for more cost-effective alternatives. We need to do a better job of preventing the gap from increasing.

1. Research shows that a student’s first semester is crucial to successful retention. St. Norbert does a variety of things to create a positive learning and living environment. However, there is always more that can be done. The University of South Carolina, for example, has a call center that contacts every freshman during the first semester to see students are adjusting to college life. The callers are trained by the counseling staff to ask questions which, depending on how they are answered, may initiate further intervention. This has helped to increase their freshman retention.

1. Parents play a vital role in the selection of a college. They also play an equally important role when their son or daughter decides to transfer. Our alumni office sends out three newsletters a year to parents of current SNC students. In addition to these newsletters the parents also receive the St. Norbert Magazine. These are two great forms of communication that help to bring the college to these families. The question I ask is can we do more? Schools throughout the country have created mailings targeting parents of current freshmen to help inform them of everything and anything happening on campus. If the parents feel more invested in the school, they are much more likely to encourage their son or daughter to stick it out through difficult times.

No matter how much we are doing, there is always room for new and creative ways to retain students. The bad news is that most of these ideas will cost money to implement. The good news is, if we increase our retention rate by one percent, we should be able to cover the majority of these expenses.