On Track: A University Retention Model

Utilizing School Counseling Program Interns

Jill M. Thorngren
South Dakota State University

Mark D. Nelson and Larry J. Baker
Montana State University – Bozeman

Barbara Zuck
Montana State University – Northern

Rebecca L. Koltz
Montana State University – Bozeman

Abstract

This article outlines a pilot study conducted with persisting and non-persisting students in a mid-sized public university in the West. Based on those findings, a retention initiative was developed. The study and initiative both utilize the ASCA framework, making a case that this model has application in institutions of higher education as well as public schools. The significance of collaborations between school counseling programs and college advising centers is also portrayed.

Keywords: retention, school counselors, collaboration, advising

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The national average first-year to second-year college retention rate across all institution types is 67.1%. Persistence to graduation after five years across all types of institutions averages 46%. (ACT Institutional Data File, 2011). Retaining college students is a principal concern for institutions of higher education. Students, parents, university personnel, and communities are all adversely affected when students leave college. While academic dismissal accounts for a portion of attrition, it has been reported that only 15 to 25 percent of all institutional departures are due to academic failure (Tinto, 1993). A more comprehensive model is necessary to fully understand and remedy retention issues. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) developed a national model of school counseling programs (2012) that includes three student developmental domains that allow for examination of not only the *academic,* but also the *personal/social* and *career* issues associated with students leaving college.

Retention of students is an important issue across the nation's college and university campuses. Waller and Tietjen-Smith (2009) noted in a 2008 study from the Center for the Study of College Student Retention that nearly 50% of students entering higher education will not earn a degree. One of the best known researchers in the field of college student retention has stated unequivocally that students are more likely to persist to graduation in settings that provide academic, social, and personal support (Tinto, 1993).

Additionally, the 2006 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) reported that student engagement is positively related to first-year and senior student grades, as

well as level of persistence between the first and second year of college. It was also noted that "student engagement has compensatory effects on grades and persistence of students from historically underserved backgrounds" (p.14). Consequently, it appears that the concept of strong interpersonal connections is supported as a positive factor in college retention. Therefore, the authors of this article decided to qualitatively explore what experiences students found conducive to a successful completion of a college career, and subsequently developed an intervention program from the results to increase retention rates. This retention initiative was designed utilizing the ASCA framework; therefore, implications for secondary schools will be addressed as they relate to higher education. The first part of this article will address the pilot study results while the second part of the article will describe a retention initiative, *On Track,* as an innovative method to address the transition of young people to college careers.

Pilot Study Method

To further understand retention issues within a college at a medium size university in a rural, western state experiences of college student success were explored. More specifically, experiences of both those students who chose to un-enroll and those students who persisted with their studies were asked about experiences they found conducive to a successful college career.

Sample

For this pilot study the sample consisted of students from a mid-sized western university. These students were identified in a college of education and health and human development by the academic advising center housed within this college. The

sample consisted of two types of students. Those students who had chosen to un-enroll from the subsequent semester, as well as those students who persisted.

Data Collection

This study consisted of two forms of inquiry telephone interviews with: students who had not re-enrolled in a subsequent semester (non-persisters), and students currently enrolled in the college were interviewed (persisters). Questions in both focused on the academic, personal, and career developing experiences of students. Students responded with their perceptions of what the institution was doing to help ensure success in these areas and what could be done more effectively. Students were grouped into those with a GPA below 2.0 and those with a GPA higher than 2.0. An overarching theme across the two groups (GPA's) was a desire for more connectivity between students and faculty, staff, and administration. The following table (Table 1) outlines questions asked of non-persisters.

Table 1

Questions for the Phone Interview (Non-persisters)

1.	Please name the biggest factors in your choice to not re-enroll at this university this semester?
2.	How satisfied were you with your academic experience at the university and what suggestions could you give for enhancing academic experiences at this university?
3.	How satisfied were you with student services at this university and what suggestions could you give for enhancing student services at this university?
4.	How satisfied were you with your personal and social experiences while attending MSU and how involved do you believe this institution should be in the personal and social experiences of students?
5.	What is the most important thing that personnel at this institution should know about how to keep students here?

The results of the phone interview suggested that respondents with a GPA below a 2.0 leave the institution primarily for financial and personal reasons. Sample responses included the following: "instructors seemed not to care about students," "better seating in classrooms would make learning easier," "the financial aid office should send hard copies of bills" (as opposed to electronic versions). Yet one student responded that the academic experience was "great," indicating that the reason for non-enrollment was financial, not personal.

The results also suggest that respondents with a GPA above a 2.0 leave the institution primarily for personal, rather than financial, reasons. Students in this sample offered comments which suggested that students would like faculty to be more involved or connected with students, registration processes and course availability could be improved, and communication and help with advising and financial aid services could be improved. Themes that emerged from these data included an apparent desire from respondents for an increase in the quality and quantity of interpersonal interactions across campus and an increase in the number of options available to them.

When asked to rank their awareness of and satisfaction with student services, similar responses were garnered. Using a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 representing highest awareness and satisfaction, the results suggested that respondents with a GPA below a 2.0 were less aware of and less satisfied with student services than respondents with a GPA above a 2.0. Respondents with a GPA below a 2.0 offered the following comments: "…people working the Math learning center should circulate around room and offer more help," "people should make more time for students," "let students know

about services during recruitment and orientation," and, one felt that student services were doing a good job.

Respondents with a GPA above a 2.0 suggested that support services in the Math learning center could be improved; professors could take a role in promoting and/or requiring services; the advertisement of support services could be enhanced, and [faculty and support services staff] should make time for students. A theme that again emerged included an increase in interpersonal interaction. This was evidenced by respondents asking for more interaction in the math center and a request for professors to become more involved in promoting student services.

As stated earlier, there was a general theme present in the interviews with "non-persisters" that the university could do more to enhance the quantity and quality of interpersonal interactions between students, faculty, and staff. This theme emerged in response to inquiries about academic experiences, student services, and a general question about persistence.

The second part of the study focused on "persisters" in the same college. Through email invitations, an online survey was administered to 1,156 students who met a set of criteria. An initial e-mail invitation and two follow-up email invitations resulted in a response rate of 18 percent, or 208 responses. The following table (Table 2) contains the questions asked to explore the experience of staying in college.

Table 2

Questions for the Online Survey (Persisters)

1.	What specific suggestions could you offer for enhancing academic experiences at this university?
2.	What part, if any, do you believe this university plays or should play in enhancing personal and social experiences of students?
3.	What is the most important thing that personnel should know about how to keep students here and help them be successful?

Following collection of data, qualitative analyses focused on exploring themes from the open-ended question. These themes described students' experiences of persisting. While there were variations in the themes that emerged with each question, commonalities existed among the responses with the "persisters," as well as between the "persisters" and the "non-persisters." Again a general theme regarding enhancing the quality and quantity of interpersonal interactions between students and faculty/staff across the university was prominent in this second round of questioning. However, specific themes such as *Enhanced Communication and Awareness, Faculty Relations, Enhanced Advising, and Enhanced Teaching* emerged in the "persisters" responses which attested to the importance of interpersonal relationships in the lives of students interviewed. As might be expected, additional resources, both financial and environmental, were also named by students in both studies as being conducive to retaining students. This was second, however, to the primacy of quality relationships. As a result of this initial qualitative inquiry a retention program was developed which utilized school counselor interns to assist in student advising. Based upon the data collected, a retention initiative was designed to improve retention among college students.

Retention Initiative: On Track

Retention Program

Based on findings from the pilot study, two counselor educators developed the *On Track* retention program. The *On Track* initiative focused on the holistic development and success of students from their freshmen through senior years. Enhancing academic advising, this program promoted the personal/social development and career trajectories of students. It is grounded in research based on student engagement and retention, and incorporates the ASCA school counseling model of *academic, personal/social, and career development*.

Academic advisors often noted that they are called upon to provide "counseling" to their advisees and felt unprepared to do so. College counseling centers often have waiting lists of students with serious mental health issues. *On Track* was designed to fill the gap created between these services.

In the *On Track* program, master's counseling interns are assigned to an academic college and carry a caseload of undergraduate students as advisors. *On Track* advisors focused their attention in three primary areas: 1) understanding why students may be struggling academically, 2) finding ways to engage in and maintain personal connections with peers, faculty, and the university community, and; 3) exploring career interests/aptitudes and developing strategies that apply current studies to career paths. The program created connections between graduate and undergraduate students and collectively benefited the students and college by providing a venue for relationships to be formed. It was this relational component that both "persisters" and "non-persisters" identified as needed.

Characteristics of On Track

  On Track provided support to students utilizing internal personnel and fiscal resources of the college. The following points describe the characteristics and specific aims of this program:

1. Counseling interns staffed offices in two of the buildings that are most frequently used by students in the college. They work in shifts from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday.

2. Counseling interns were available for walk in and appointments scheduled by students, as well as for referred appointments from advising center staff and faculty. Instructors in courses such as freshmen seminar may refer students as part of course assignments.

3. The focus of mentoring appointments with students was on well-being and student development, including academic, personal/social, and career development.

4. Counseling interns served as referral sources for the University Counseling Center if undergraduates were in need of in-depth mental health services.

5. Counseling interns were assigned a caseload of 20-30 freshmen and sophomore students enrolled in the college. Contact is made at least twice a semester with each assigned student. Contacts include phone calls, emails, and/or face to face appointments.

6. All students in the college receiving D or F grades at mid-term were contacted by interns and scheduled for a mentoring appointment.

7. Counseling interns participated in orientation sessions to meet incoming students and parents.

8. Interns were supervised by, and met regularly with, a counselor education faculty member.

On Track created connections between graduate and undergraduate students and collectively provided benefits to the students and college. Specific benefits of the program for undergraduate students included the following:

- Increased levels of engagement and connection with the college and university. (Personal/Social Development)

- Increased opportunity to explore issues that may be impeding their academic progress. (Academic Development)

- Increased opportunity to explore interests, skills, and abilities, as well as discover which career paths were most suitable with their current studies. (Career Development)

In addition, to the undergraduate students, counseling students received the additional benefit of increasing clinical experience and hours toward graduation and licensure, as well as valuable career counseling related experience.

Theoretical Model

To provide structure to meetings between interns and advisees and to frame both the clinical work and data collection within a theoretical base, a three to four session model was developed by the second author. This model is not only useful in the context of higher education, but is also a useful model to work with high school students with

regard to their college plans. The model AIM (Awareness, Information, Making Plans and Decisions) is described below.

AIM: Awareness – Information – Making Plans and Decisions

The approach outlined here utilizes the trait and factor model as a framework in which Holland's typology theory, social cognitive career theory, and Erikson's psychosocial theory are integrated. First espoused by Frank Parsons, (1909) the trait and factor approach has three primary components: (a) *learn about yourself*, (b) *learn about the world of work*, and (c*) integrate the information and make a decision.* These components may be condensed into a model of developmental stages in a college mentoring process:

The "AIM" model provides an organizing framework for the mentoring relationship between the advisors and the freshman to increase student success. AIM is founded on three principles:

1. Students will understand the relationship between personal qualities, education, training, and the world of work. (Awareness)

2. Students will acquire the skills to investigate the world of work in relation to knowledge of self and to make informed career decisions. (Information)

3. Students will employ strategies to achieve future career goals with success and satisfaction. (Making Plans/Decisions)

Awareness. The first stage in the AIM model, learning about oneself, involves developing a greater self-awareness related to interests, abilities, values, and personality styles. This process is congruent with the developmental tasks of many college students, as well as many high school students. Assessment of interests,

abilities, values, and personality types can be conducted through various means such as interviews, observations, experiential activities, informal checklists, and standardized instruments.

Information. Gaining occupational and educational information is the focus of the second stage in the AIM model. Learning about the world of work and post-secondary education can be conceptualized through Holland's theory as students learn about the six types of work environments. Information about work environments and the educational requirements for certain occupations can be gathered from written sources or via computer. Again, this model can be useful for high school counselors, as many students are seeking information about the world of work and what potential career paths they want to explore.

Making Plans and Decisions. The third stage of the AIM model is integrating self-awareness with information about the world of work and post-secondary education to make plans and decisions. An essential part of this stage is finding a match between occupational/educational choices and one's interests, abilities, and values. For many college students this means considering how their educational choices will impact their vocational options. This is much the same for high school students as many young people have not considered or even know how their educational decisions impact even their ability to go to college. Mentors facilitate students' decision-making process and focus attention on self-defeating cognitions that may limit career and educational possibilities.

Summary. The success-related developmental tasks for college students, and potentially high school students, seem to fall under the general headings of *awareness, information, and making plans/decisions:*

1. Increasing their self-awareness across the areas of interests, abilities, and values.

2. Actively engaging in a personal, career, and educational identity search.

3. Increasing their awareness of how performance in high school will impact their future educational and career choices.

4. Increasing their exploration and understanding of a variety of educational options and occupations.

5. Increasing their competency with career and life planning and decision-making skills.

6. Clarifying and committing to educational and/or occupational goals beyond high school.

Mentors may develop a four session approach in addressing the AIM model. These sessions can be facilitated with individuals or small, even classroom-sized, groups. Separate sessions dedicated to awareness, information, and making plans/decisions can be following by a follow-up or summary session. This last session is an important reflective session where students are encouraged to realize that there are many academic and career paths available and to review their career journey. A journey of any kind without aim is likely to result in becoming lost and confused.

Career choice is one of the most significant decisions we make in our lives. AIM is a model of academic and career development that highlights students' need to

become aware of themselves, inform themselves about the world of work and post-secondary education, and to make plans and decisions regarding their futures. The AIM format is guided by the following mantra: *Whenever traveling along an unknown path, it is important to have AIM*. Additional resources regarding this initiative are found in Appendix A.

Summary and Limitations

On Track was piloted for one year and appears to be garnering successful results. Academic advisors have praised the program and noted that it is a "win-win" for them, their advisees, and the graduate students. Preliminary feedback from advisees indicates an overall positive response. School counseling students have noted that it gives them additional experiences outside of the K-12 setting and helps them better prepare to work with high school students who will be making the transition to post-secondary educational pursuits. It is also possible that this type of format could be very successful for high school counselors as many career plans are beginning at that time.

An obvious limitation is the need for analysis of data related to retention and college completion rates of participating students. While gathering and analysis of this information is in the initial stages, anecdotal data indicate that *On Track* shows promise in addressing the engagement aspect of student success and college completion. Additionally there is a need to develop further lines of research that include collaborations between high school counselors and college advisors to better prepare students for a successful transition between high school and college.

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Appendix A

On-Track Initiative – Scope of Work

The College of EHHD is committed to the retention of our college's students.

Consequently, the college has designed a mentoring program, known as the "On-Track

Initiative," which will be implemented over the next 12 months. The purpose of the On-

Track Initiative is to increase freshman and sophomore retention and to promote

student success. As a part of their internship experiences, counseling graduate students

will provide mentorship and support to EHHD students as they progress through their

programs of study. The On-Track Initiative is based upon a model that utilizes

mentorship that integrates the academic, career, and personal developmental domains

of students' university life.

Program Goals

1. Help students be successful in their lives

2. Training for counseling students

3. Retention of students at MSU

Process Objectives

1. We will work as an interdisciplinary Team.

2. We will respect each other's ideas and contributions.

3. We will adapt our interventions and approaches according to their effectiveness.

Session Intervention Areas

1. Academic

    - Learning styles

    - Study skills

- Prioritization and Organizational skills

2. Career

- Where have you been? Where are you now? Where are you going?

- How does your major fit your career aspirations?

- How did you choose your major (looking for family influences, self-efficacy, etc…)

3. Personal Social

- What are your hopes, aspirations, and your beliefs about making them happen?

- Family – Friends – School: check in and discuss

- Tell about the stressors in your life… What supports do you have right now?