

 LEADING STRATEGIES

Partnering with Students to Address Academic Issues That Impact Retention

By Daniel McDevitt and Kimberly Allen-Stuck

Literature Review: Academic Struggles and Retention

During the 21st century, more students have been enrolled in U.S. higher education than ever before (Gray, Vitak, Easton, and Ellison 2013). These individuals are entering postsecondary education from more diverse backgrounds and with a much broader range of overall goals, values, and skills than their peers before them (Davig and Spain 2004). As first-year students begin to navigate higher education, they often realize not only the complications associated with the initial separation from family and friends and the need to form new social relationships but also the immense challenges and increased difficulties related to college-level academics (O’Keeffe 2013). Although the majority of new college students eventually adjust, upwards of one-third of them withdraw or transfer during their first academic year (Wischusen, Wischusen, and Pomarico 2011).

New Students, New Challenges

To complicate matters further, the current generation of college-aged students brings challenges and issues different from those seen in higher education previously. Among them are a shifting focus from knowledge exploration to job preparation, a growing generational gap in technology use between faculty and students, and an increase in mental and emotional health issues (Keup 2008). According to the Center for Collegiate Mental

Health (2017), counseling center utilization on college campuses has increased by 30 percent over the past five years while the average institutional enrollment has grown by only 5 percent during the same time period. As students and their attendant challenges change, so the institutions and education leaders working with them must adapt to meet emergent needs (Cartmell 2015). In higher education, there is no ‘one size fits all,’ even when it comes to a “typical” college student.

Academic and Social Systems

The majority of colleges comprise many different communities and subcultures, each of which has its own characteristics, values, and norms (Tinto 2012). How students navigate these various systems has a major impact on their ability to acclimate to campus and continue their progress toward a higher education degree. Although one dominant culture typically establishes the standards throughout any given university, Tinto (2012) postulates that students need not conform to this singular set of values in order to persist and in fact can do just fine by finding and interacting with one or more of the sub-communities that better suits their personality and style.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1983) concluded that positive interactions with the academic systems in college had the most profound impact for those struggling with the social systems and vice versa. In addition, Laskey and Hetzel (2011) stated that “In relationship to retention,

when students feel they can be successful in their academic pursuits, they are more likely to stay in school” (40). That said, during the period of separation from past associations and transition into higher education, individuals sometimes feel their academic performance is inadequate in comparison to that of their peers. This is referred to as “impostor syndrome” (Richards 2015). Sullivan (1997), however, determined that students with even a small number of friends on campus experienced less academic and social competition and more support among classmates and faculty. This led her to deduce that inclusion in these systems helped promote a sense of membership within the overall university community. Other research indicates that greater involvement in campus activities leads to a higher level of commitment from the student to the institution, which in turn increases the likelihood that a student will persist (Campbell and Mislevy 2012; Schultheis 2015; Turner and Thompson 2014). The academic and social realms are not mutually exclusive; in fact, proficiency in one realm can make up for shortcomings in the other.

Challenges Associated With Retaining Low-Achieving Students

Among the challenges that arise for students who perform poorly in their academic endeavors, especially early in their college careers, are:

- *Overcoming a Low GPA:* Students who perform poorly can have a difficult time raising their cumulative GPA to a satisfactory level.
- *Scholarship Reduction or Revocation:* Academic scholarships that carry a minimum GPA requirement may be reduced or revoked if a student does not meet specified criteria.
- *Loss of Financial Aid Eligibility:* Students who are not making satisfactory academic progress toward a degree may lose their federal financial aid.
- *Discouragement:* Students may feel defeated and give up after earning a low semester GPA.
- *Academic Dismissal:* Institutions may dismiss students who are not meeting minimum academic requirements.

- *Majors With Minimum GPA Requirements:* Some majors require students to meet or exceed a certain GPA in order to earn a degree (*e.g.*, in Pennsylvania, education majors are required to have or exceed a 3.0 GPA in order to student teach during their senior year).

The most recent results of the “Barriers to Success” survey, which is administered to first-year students at Saint Joseph’s University who earn less than a 2.0 GPA during their first semester, indicate that the following are most responsible for students’ sub-par academic marks:

- Poor performance on exams and quizzes—77 percent
- Poor time management—74 percent
- Concentration is easily broken—69 percent
- Good intentions but poor follow through—68 percent
- Not enough time spent reviewing material—54 percent

Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure

Much of the retention work being done at Saint Joseph’s University is rooted in Tinto’s (1975) longitudinal theory of individual departure from institutions of higher education, which is considered “one of the most widely accepted and cited explanations of student departure” (Sullivan 1997, 5). According to this model, students enter college with a variety of background characteristics (*e.g.*, race, socioeconomic status, family educational achievement, etc.) that lead to different levels of commitment to both degree attainment and the specific university they attend. Experience and interaction with the institution’s academic and social systems influence students’ overall academic and social integration, which in turn modifies individual intentions and commitments to graduation.

Tinto (2012) utilizes Van Gennep’s (1960) model of rites of passage to illustrate individual integration into higher education. Ultimately, students must pass through three separate stages (separation from past communities, transition between secondary and postsecondary education, and incorporation into the society of college) as they integrate both academically and socially into their

new school environment. The more academically and/or socially integrated an individual student becomes at an institution, the more likely he or she is to persist at that school. In addition to these internal institutional systems are external factors (*e.g.*, family, finances, outside commitments, etc.) that influence student persistence in both positive and negative ways (Tinto 2012).

What follow are descriptions of three specific initiatives at Saint Joseph's University to increase the retention of undergraduate students facing academic challenges.

First-Year Students: Rebound Program

The Rebound Program started in January 2010 after the previous class's retention rate to sophomore year decreased by 2 percentage points. In an effort to identify the causes of attrition, it was discovered that 12 percent of all first-year students earned a GPA of less than 2.0 in their first-semester coursework. In response, the university developed the Rebound Program to help first-year students experience greater academic success during the spring semester.

Participation in the Rebound Program is strictly voluntary. Students complete a "barriers to success" online assessment (which they review with a Rebound Committee member), attend a series of seven workshops, and participate in at least three individual coaching sessions. Throughout the program students are introduced to a variety of support systems on campus and are encouraged to utilize their services during the semester.

Seven years after implementing the Rebound Program, the average retention rate to sophomore year for students who complete the program is equivalent to the overall university retention rate (89 percent)—significantly greater than the 54 percent retention rate for students who were eligible for but did not enroll in the Rebound Program. (Additional statistics are presented below.)

Eligibility

The Rebound Program provides support to any first-year SJU student who earned a fall semester GPA of

less than 2.0 (the minimum GPA needed to graduate). Traditional first-time, full-time undergraduate students (*i.e.*, "freshmen") as well as transfer students whose first semester at SJU was in the fall semester are included in the outreach pool. Typically, between 7 and 8 percent of the first-year class qualify for the Rebound Program in any given year.

Marketing

During the first week of January, the Office of Student Success runs a report to obtain final-term GPA data from the fall semester for all first-year students. Those students who earned less than a 2.0 GPA are identified as members of the cohort who will be invited to join the Rebound Program for the upcoming spring semester. A letter is sent to the students' home addresses and is followed by several e-mails sent to their university and personal accounts.

Scholarship Incentive

At the conclusion of the academic year, SJU merit scholarships are assessed for students who have not met the minimum GPA requirement. Any student whose cumulative GPA is less than the minimum requirement loses 20 percent of the value of the scholarship for the subsequent academic year. However, students who qualify for and participate in the Rebound Program retain their full merit scholarship for the next academic year if they meet all of the program requirements and meet or exceed the minimum GPA during the spring semester only (as opposed to needing their cumulative GPA to attain that level). For a large portion of Rebound-qualified students, it would be mathematically impossible to increase their cumulative GPA in one academic semester to the level needed to maintain their full merit scholarship.

Programmatic Elements

Participation in the Rebound Program is tracked using a points system. Students receive points (unweighted) for completing each of the following requirements:

- **Barriers to success assessment (1 point):** This online self-assessment gives students the opportunity to

reflect on the fall semester and identify some of the reasons they struggled academically. Common issues include:

- ★ poor time management;
- ★ social distractions (both in person and screen time); and
- ★ not enough time spent reviewing course materials.

This is the first time some students think critically about the barriers that prevented them from doing well during the fall semester.

■ **Attend an orientation session (1 point):** Two orientation sessions are held prior to the start of the program (students need to attend only one). Students receive an overview of the Rebound Program and also sign the Rebound Contract (see below). They also begin to understand that other first-year students had similar academic struggles during the fall and that their experience is not unique.

■ **Sign the Rebound Contract (1 point):** Even though it is not legally binding, the Rebound Contract sets forth expectations for program participants. The contract includes a GPA section that the Office of Student Success completes for those students who have merit scholarships they are trying to retain in full for the upcoming year. The section clearly states the GPA they would need to achieve during the spring semester in order to raise their cumulative GPA above the level needed to keep their merit scholarship. (For some, that number is greater than 4.0, which is mathematically impossible at SJU.)

■ **Three meetings with a Rebound Committee member (3 points):** Each student is assigned a mentor from the Rebound Committee, which includes approximately one dozen full-time student support administrators who volunteer their time for individual meetings and work with Rebound students throughout the spring semester. Members come from the offices of Student Success, Learning Resources, Student Disability Services, Academic Advising, Student Athlete Support, and Inclusion & Diversity.

■ **Attend seven one-hour group workshops (7 points):** The group workshops are the core of the Rebound Program. Presenters from various support offices on campus lead hour-long sessions on the following topics:

- ★ Getting organized for the semester;
- ★ The power of your learning style;
- ★ Effective note taking and study skills;
- ★ Developing your communication skills;
- ★ Motivation and procrastination;
- ★ Career interests and aptitude; and
- ★ Planning ahead.

At the end of the semester, points are tallied and students are assigned to one of three corresponding categories:

- 12–13 points: Completer
- 5–11 points: Active participant
- 0–4 points: Non-participant

Outcomes

SJU's Rebound Program took place for the eighth consecutive year in spring 2017. Since the program's inception

- 57 percent of students who qualified for the program signed up to participate;
- 66 percent of students who signed up for the program completed all of its requirements;
- completion rates have been 90 percent and 84 percent, respectively, for the past two years;
- 86 percent of Rebound Program completers increased their GPAs from the fall to the spring semester;
- the average first- to second-year retention rate for students who completed the program is 89 percent (equal to SJU's overall retention rate); and
- the average first- to second-year retention rate for students who qualified but did not sign up for the program is 54 percent.

In spring 2017:

- 90 percent of students who signed up for the Rebound Program completed all of the requirements;

- 79 percent of completers earned a spring GPA greater than 2.0; and
- 93 percent of completers increased their GPAs from the fall to the spring semester.

As a direct result of the Rebound Program's success in helping first-year students improve their academic performance, a new program, PASS, was developed in 2015.

Support for Students on Academic Probation: PASS

To address the needs of returning students facing academic obstacles, Probation Academic Success Strategies (PASS) was introduced in fall 2015. After years of positive outcomes for the Rebound Program, it was time to address the academic challenges of returning students. Many students who participate in the Rebound Program later qualify for PASS, so the program had to be different—and more personalized.

Unlike participants in the Rebound Program, those in PASS do not meet as a group or complete a series of workshops; instead, PASS connects struggling students with the resources their PASS mentors identify to help them succeed academically.

Eligibility

Each year, between 80 and 110 students (approximately 2 percent of all SJU students) are placed on academic probation. To graduate, students must have a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.0. PASS identifies students on their first probation. (See Table 1.)

Marketing

Students are notified of their probationary status in June by letter and email; a letter and brochure introducing PASS are sent in early July. Information about PASS is also included in a mailing to students who are not making satisfactory academic progress for federal financial aid.

Multiple rounds of follow-up e-mails are sent to students, and faculty advisors are encouraged to recommend that their advisees take advantage of the PASS program. Over the past two years, approximately 45 per-

cent of students eligible for PASS have participated in this voluntary program.

Programmatic Elements

PASS is offered during the fall semester and includes the following components:

- Students complete a self-assessment, the results of which identify the kinds of support and resources they need (*e.g.*, change major, attend counseling, change living arrangements, etc.).
- Students are matched with a PASS mentor (a professional staff member). Their first meeting takes place prior to the start of the fall semester. Students meet with their PASS mentors at least four times during the semester to monitor progress and plan for overcoming obstacles to academic success. Mentors work with students to create academic plans so they can maintain satisfactory academic progress—and retain federal financial assistance.
- The regular meetings provide students with a point person to whom they are accountable—someone they can ask questions they are not willing to ask their peers (many students on probation keep that

TABLE 1 ► SJU Minimum Standards for Good Academic Standing

Semester Completed	Minimum Cumulative GPA
1st	1.8
2nd	1.8
3rd	1.8
4th	1.8
5th	1.9
6th	1.9
7th	2.0

information very private). Mentors hold students responsible for implementing the plans they create to return to good academic standing. They remind students as necessary to take advantage of campus resources; if students fail to do so, mentors can ask why and inquire about students' alternative plans.

Outcomes

At the conclusion of the fall 2016 semester, 89 percent of students who had signed up for PASS had completed all of the program components.

The 40 students who completed PASS earned an average GPA of 2.43 at the end of the fall semester. The five students who participated in part of the program but did not complete the requirements earned a term GPA of 2.22. The 49 students who chose not to participate in PASS earned an average term GPA of 1.76.

At the conclusion of the fall 2016 semester, all 45 students who participated in PASS were sent an evaluation. The response rate was 76 percent.

- 91 percent of students rated the information provided by their mentor as “helpful or very helpful.”
- 90 percent of the students implemented one or more suggestion(s) their mentor offered.
- 88 percent of students would recommend PASS to students on academic probation.
- 85 percent of students reported that four mentor meetings was “just right.”
- 52 percent of students stated that they had met with their mentor more than four times during the program.

Academic dismissal decisions are made in June. In 2015, prior to the implementation of PASS, ten students were dismissed; in 2016, 11 were dismissed; and in 2017

only five were dismissed. Of the five, two had completed PASS; the remaining three had not participated. PASS helps students persist to graduation.

Plans and Appeals for Students Who Are Not Making Satisfactory Academic Progress

Since 2011, colleges have had to monitor satisfactory academic progress (SAP) for students who receive Title IV funds. A procedure was put in place to meet the federal guidelines, but it was not until this year that SJU evaluated how the program was being managed and identified some deficits.

The website with information about SAP—copied from the federal guidelines—was confusing. The form for providing an appeal/academic plan was paper—not even a fillable PDF. A single e-mail notified students that they were going to lose their federal financial aid and directed them to the Web portal to review their aid package. As the deadline approached, there was no personal outreach to students who had not submitted a plan.

During the 2016–17 academic year, a task force was convened to improve this process for students.

Table 2 presents the data for the 116 undergraduates who met the criteria for failing to make satisfactory academic progress in fall 2016.

Only 35 percent of the students who were not making satisfactory academic progress registered for fall

TABLE 2 ► Students Not Making Satisfactory Academic Progress, 2016

116 Students	Percentage	Registered	FAFSA in FY '16	On Plan	No Federal Aid / Merit Reduced
38	33	Yes	Yes	Yes	
2	2	Yes	No	Yes	
10	9	Yes	No	No	Yes
5	4	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
24	21	Yes	No	No	
14	12	Yes	Yes	No	
10	9	No	Yes		
13	11	No	No		

classes and completed a SAP plan. Sixteen percent of the students who were not making SAP and who had submitted the FAFSA the previous year were registered for classes but did not submit a SAP plan and so did not receive federal financial aid. Another 30 percent of students did not submit a SAP plan and were registered for fall classes. These students may not be eligible for federal aid because they did not submit the FAFSA the previous year. Twenty percent of the students who were not making SAP did not register for classes in fall 2016.

Twenty-nine students who had filed a FAFSA the previous year did not submit a SAP plan, so they were not eligible for federal financial aid in 2017–18. This is an attrition risk that the institution could address through marketing and education.

Eligibility

The federal government requires every school that administers federal student aid to have policies for measuring students' academic progress. This ensures that schools are actively monitoring the use of taxpayer funds and verifying that those funds are being used to advance students toward the attainment of a degree. Saint Joseph's University has the authority to set its own standards, but those standards must include qualitative and quantitative measures. SJU also has the authority to evaluate and grant a reprieve, on a case-by-case basis, to students who are not meeting the standards. SAP is measured annually after the conclusion of the spring semester. Typically, SAP is based on two semesters of academic credit. The qualitative measure of satisfactory academic progress is the cumulative GPA.

The minimum standard for undergraduate students is in accordance with the academic probation policy:

- 1.8 cumulative GPA at the end of the 2nd semester or up to 30 credits
- 1.8 cumulative GPA at the end of the 4th semester or up to 60 credits
- 1.9 cumulative GPA at the end of the 6th semester or up to 90 credits
- 2.0 cumulative GPA anytime following the 7th semester or greater than 90 credits

The minimum standard for graduate students is a 2.0 GPA at the end of the spring term.

The quantitative measure of satisfactory academic progress is credits earned between June and May:

- The standard for undergraduate day students is 24 completed credits.
- The standard for adult students is 67 percent of credits attempted.
- The standard for graduate students is 75 percent of credits attempted.

Marketing

Since 2011, one general informational email was sent to all students recommending that they check their financial aid status in the student portal to review whether their financial assistance was being changed in any way (including institutional merit scholarships, decreases in federal grants, etc.). The task force recommended increasing the number of communications sent to students between June and the first day of classes.

The new marketing plan is a partnership among student success and financial aid staff, the deans' offices, and PASS. Outreach includes letters, brochures, e-mails, phone calls, and an intervention when students pick up their keys for housing (approximately 60 percent of SJU students live on campus).

A new website was created with information about SAP, including clear criteria. An online form with routing logic that directs the forms to appropriate offices for faster review (<sju.edu/SAPUG>) was created to enable students to submit an appeal/academic plan. A Cognos report was also created that can be pulled daily to determine when students' plans have been accepted and their financial aid awarded.

Programmatic Elements

Unlike the other two initiatives, the marketing and outreach efforts constitute the bulk of the program. The goal is for students to develop individualized plans so they can continue to receive federal financial aid. The revised online form directs SJU students to campus services and actions to support their academic success—for example:

- Changing major
- Adjusting work hours
- Increasing time spent on course work
- Meeting with an advisor
- Seeking personal counseling
- Registering with student disability services
- Resolving financial issues
- Tutoring, study skills
- Joining PASS

Students are also required to contact their advisor to create a semester-by-semester degree completion plan. Plans for making satisfactory academic progress must be submitted following the last day of add/drop.

As a result of increased marketing and outreach, the percentage of undergraduate day students submitting SAP plans increased by 16 percentage points from 2016 to 2017. The percentage of undergraduate day stu-

dents who have access to federal financial assistance will have those funds to meet their fall expenses and will be less likely to have a balance due that would prevent them from registering for the spring semester.

Summary

Ultimately, it is students' responsibility to perform well academically and to earn the grades required to progress toward graduation. However, the university also has a responsibility to provide students with the greatest opportunity for success and to support them along the way. It is therefore optimal for institutions to partner with students and to establish processes and programs to help them succeed academically and ultimately earn their degrees.

The interventions discussed throughout this article have all netted positive results at Saint Joseph's University (the Rebound Program for eight years, PASS for three

years, and the satisfactory academic progress communication plan this past year). Each of these initiatives takes human resources to implement, manage, track, and evaluate but can easily be done as part of a full-time employee's job responsibilities. The financial cost of these interventions is minimal, typically only time for employees and the cost of

TABLE 3 ► Students Not Making Satisfactory Academic Progress, 2017 and 2016

	2017	2016
Number of students not making SAP	105	116
Percentage on plan and registered for fall courses	50	34
Percentage not on plan and registered for fall courses	29	47
Percentage not on plan who filed a FAFSA for the previous year [subset of the "not on plan" group above]	7	16
Percentage not registered for fall 2017 courses	21	20

dents who did not submit a SAP plan but who had filed a FAFSA the previous year decreased by 9 percentage points from 2016 to 2017.

In fall 2017, 79 percent of all undergraduate day students who were not making SAP were registered for courses (similar to the percentage who had registered in 2016). Thus, the overall net percentage change in students retained related to SAP outreach from 2016 to 2017 is -1 percent.

The overall impact of additional students submitting plans may improve fall to spring retention because stu-

printing and mailing letters to students. The return on investment for helping more students succeed and progress toward graduation is very high.

Although no single solution has yet been discovered for all of the retention and persistence issues in U.S. higher education, the hope is that this article gives other institutions more confidence to try new initiatives in support of all students. A simple program can go a long way in increasing student success at any college or university.

About the Authors



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Kimberly Allen-Stuck

Kimberly Allen-Stuck is Assistant Vice President for Student Success and Educational Support at Saint Joseph's University. She has worked in the student success field at SJU since 2007. During that time the first-year to sophomore retention rate has increased from 85.5 percent to 91 percent. This can

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