

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Influencing Student Persistence of Low Performing, First-Term Students through Academic Enrichment

By John Haller and Darby O. Plummer

Student retention in higher education is a primary indicator of institutional reputation, impacting factors such as national rankings, admissions selectivity, and alumni support (Lee, Sanford, and Lee 2014). Programs designed to support student success in the first year and beyond generally intersect with the institutional mission. Utilizing quantitative data, the University of Miami (UM) identified academically at-risk students and developed an intervention program to help them get back on track. UM positively affected retention rates for this population by eight percentage points over the past seven years. This study highlights the specific details of data analytics, program development, and both quantitative and qualitative outcomes for this student persistence initiative.

The University of Miami (UM) is a private not-for-profit institution classified by the Carnegie Commission as a doctoral university with the highest research activity (R1). The university's twelve colleges and schools offer 138 bachelor's, 140 master's, and 67 doctoral (62 research/scholarship and five professional practice) programs. UM is made up of three campuses and the Richmond Facility, which incorporates more than 200 university-owned buildings on more than 400 acres. The main campus, Coral Gables, is made up of two colleges and seven schools providing both undergraduate and grad-

uate-level education. This study focuses on the undergraduate student population located on the Coral Gables campus, which in Fall 2021 reported an unduplicated headcount of 11,925 degree-seeking students. Forty-six percent of the undergraduate student body identifies as Hispanic or Latino, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian, or multi-racial (University of Miami 2021)

Purpose

UM has enjoyed robust retention and graduation rates since 2009, which culminated with a *U.S. News* ranking

as a top 50 national university in 2012 (*U.S. News* 2012). With a retention rate of 93 percent and a six-year graduate rate of 82 percent in 2022, the number of students who do not persist is low relative to the 72 percent national average first-year retention rate and 64 percent national average six-year graduation rate (University of Miami 2021; NSC 2022; NCES 2022). As such, it was difficult finding a meaningful population of students who exhibited persistence barriers. However, students who earn a GPA of 2.0 or below in the first term exhibit lower retention rates than those who earn above a 2.0 GPA. Latest data from Fall 2023 shows that students earning above a 2.0 after the first term had an average retention rate of 92.8 percent, while students earning at or below a 2.0 GPA were retained at 70 percent (Calvo 2023). This population contributes annually to a 1 percent lower overall retention rate for UM. Note that a one percentage point decline in retention results in a loss of \$2.6 million in institutional net revenue over three years. Additionally, students with below a 2.0 GPA are at risk of losing institutional and federal financial aid support for not meeting the minimum GPA requirements needed to retain eligibility. Losing access to financial resources can necessitate transferring to another institution. To assist this population, the GPAid program was developed to identify and provide support for first-year students at the end of the first semester.

GPAid

GPAid is a cost-free program designed to support students who are not meeting the minimum academic requirements in their course of study at the end of their first term in college. It addresses student challenges holistically, helping students identify and overcome both academic and non-academic factors that adversely impact their success in the first college term. The program includes four components—self-assessment/motivation/empowerment; overcoming apprehension to engage with support services; building a meaningful advisor relationship; and understanding UM policies—all geared toward getting the student back on track quickly while minimizing the long-term impact of underperforming in the student's first term.

GPAid launched in Fall 2015 as a pilot in the College of Arts and Sciences. Thirty students were identified as program eligible, with ten students opting to participate and become the first trial cohort. The results of the GPAid pilot were encouraging. All ten participants persisted into the subsequent fall semester, with 100 percent retention, while those who did not participate, retained at 70 percent. Additionally, the trial participants earned an average GPA of 2.09, 0.45 higher than those who did not participate with a GPA of 1.64. GPAid participants had an average term GPA increase of 0.60, while those invited who did not take advantage of GPAid only improved their term GPA by 0.27. The longitudinal results of GPAid are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

Based on GPAid's initial success, other UM schools and colleges requested to join. As of 2020, GPAid is now offered across all nine undergraduate schools and colleges at UM and is considered a staple for ongoing first-year student support.

GPAid is offered cost-free to students to remove program adoption barriers. It underscores UM's commitment to student success and the "preparing students for lifelong careers" mission that begins with successful academic progress to degree completion. Additionally, a financial incentive exists for GPAid participation for students who receive financial assistance within the Office of Student Financial Assistance and Employment (OSFAE). Students who receive financial assistance are required to successfully complete coursework toward an eligible degree. This is called Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) and need-based financial aid, scholarships, and grants are awarded each year based on an assessment as to whether the student is meeting SAP or not. When a student is not meeting SAP, they are considered ineligible for aid and thus do not receive the financial resources from outside sources that they had previously counted on. When a student is not meeting SAP, an appeal can be submitted for consideration, explaining what prevented them from making adequate progress and what they are doing to ensure future success. The GPAid program criteria were developed in concert with OSFAE to meet appeal guidelines for students facing SAP issues. As a result, rather than

losing financial assistance, students who successfully complete GPAid continue to receive both institutional and federal financial aid in “warning” status until the student returns to satisfactory academic standing. This approach removes the financial barriers for students who have struggled academically and is a meaningful incentive for students to opt into GPAid. As a result, GPAid has achieved a near 50 percent adoption rate for those invited to participate, and an average of 60 students complete GPAid each year.

Prospective GPAid participants are invited to join the program via email or a print brochure mailed to the home address. The invitation and brochure communicate a message about UM’s belief in the student’s ability to succeed and the historic success of GPAid.

The first component involves self-assessment, guiding students to reflect on the activities, attitudes, choices, and behaviors that adversely impacted academic performance in the first semester. The self-assessment guide, titled *Barriers to Success*, provides students with opportunities to identify and appreciate how behaviors and choices impact the college experience while helping form a foundation of self-efficacy and ownership for future change (Whitley, Takahashi, Zwickle, Besley and Lertpratchya 2018). The survey also provides meaningful insight that is shared with a student’s academic advisor leading to more effective interaction.

The second component of GPAid focuses on the removal of embarrassment or shame surrounding poor academic performance (Nurdin, Askar and Adawiyah 2021). GPAid provides intentional foundational skills needed for achieving academic success (Alalawan, *et al.* 2019). This component includes a group orientation and two in-person workshops on time management, study skills, and mental health. During the orientation, students participate in interactive in-person sessions with a prior successful GPAid program completer and program coordinator. Conversations involve strategies that remove the stigma of failure and normalize the challenges of college transition while establishing program parameters that have proven to get students back on track. This portion of GPAid is grounded in the fact that “as much as 25 percent of student’s academic success is determined by

affective or nonacademic characteristics such as student attitudes, motivation; the degree to which students are connected to peers and university personnel as well as the degree to which a student is willing to seek help” (Fowler 2010). (While this is Fowler’s understanding (p.2), the original idea belongs to Bloom [1976]). The workshops engage students with UM’s academic resources; these sessions focus on time management, study skills, and utilizing UM’s counseling center to address issues of mental health that can adversely impact academic performance (Eisenberg, Golberstein and Hunt 2009).

Building on Bloom’s (1976) affective characteristics that impact academic success, the third component of GPAid focuses on building the student-advisor relationship (Bloom 1976). Four mandatory advising sessions are required within GPAid, as a student’s relationship and interaction with the academic advisor can be the biggest factor in promoting student retention (Tinto 1990). These sessions are held at specific times and are pre-scripted so each session addresses topics critical to the moment. The sessions also ensure consistency of content and delivery across all nine schools and colleges.

The first advising session occurs within the first month of a student’s second semester and focuses on “getting to know your student.” The session is dedicated to relationship building knowing that, “students who are the happiest and academically the most successful have developed a solid relationship with an academic advisor” (Drake 2011).

The second advising session was developed for early intervention. This session, held during the second month of the term, gives students and advisors time to discuss areas of student concern. Conversations include both academic and non-academic topics, such as coursework confidence levels and social, health, or financial concerns. Academic advisors connect students with applicable campus resources and services.

The third advising session focuses on registration preparation for the upcoming term. This occurs during the third month of the term and informs students about course sequencing in their major, addresses enrollment barriers such as registration holds, and ensures that students are actively engaging with campus resources.

The final advising session, held two weeks before final exams, provides students with mindset skills needed to complete the term. This includes mental health strategies addressing stress or anxiety, priority setting, and refreshers on UM policies to maximize academic success.

Qualitative Outcomes

Qualitative measures of GPAid, captured within the *Barriers to Success* survey, highlight that when asked about resources utilized on campus, most students indicated that they had not made use of or had only slightly used available resources. Of the resources utilized, academic advising, the student health center, and the counseling center were the three most cited. Notably, students typically did not engage with the academic resource center, the writing center, or tutoring services, illustrating that although they were struggling academically, they did not reach out to the most relevant help resources.

Poor time management, fear of failure, mental health issues, social distractions, and feelings of isolation were the top personal barriers indicated by students. The most cited time commitment barrier focused overwhelmingly on too much screen time like TV, social media, or video games. Students also indicated their top institutional barriers to success were a lack of connection to their academic advisor and poor study skills, such as a lack of concentration and skipping class. The top reason indicated as a barrier to personal study skills was not enough time spent reviewing the material. Most students expressed concerns about poor performance on tests and quizzes and noted a lack of fit with their major as a contributing factor to their academic success.

Quantitative Outcomes

The impact of GPAid has been evidenced by the difference in retention rates between students who were eligible for the program but did not participate, versus the students who completed the program. Since Fall 2017, program participants have consistently retained at 100 percent, with the exception of Fall 2020, during the

COVID-19 pandemic, when participants retained at 98 percent. This is in comparison to a 92 percent average retention rate for non-participants over the past five years. Note that results of GPAid from the pilot program are not included in Figure 1 (on page 7), as the format was not finalized until Fall 2017.

GPAid success was also evidenced in the change in term GPA from fall to spring as shown in Figure 2 (on page 9). GPAid participants saw an average term GPA increase of 0.97, while students who elected not to participate had a 0.46 average change in GPA from fall to spring (more than double the improvement).

Looking Ahead

GPAid is celebrated as a successful partnership between enrollment management and academic affairs and is evidence of the positive impact of collaboration. Looking ahead, UM continues to work to reduce the number of students eligible for GPAid, meaning fewer students qualify for the program. With continued onboarding development efforts and an expanded first-year freshman seminar course, fewer students will face academic challenges during the transition from high school to college. At UM, as the number of students with a GPA of 2.0 or under in the first semester drops, inviting students with a higher GPA has been considered. Additionally, efforts continue to maximize adoption rates as outcomes show those who participate achieve meaningful improvements in academic success and persistence. Adoption rates are lower for students who do not receive financial aid, so additional work on effectively communicating the value proposition for GPAid, outside of a financial incentive, continues. Qualitative measures of GPAid, as captured by the *Barriers to Success* survey, show that students who opt into the program are motivated to improve. Finally, work continues to maximize completion rates of students who opt in but fail to complete GPAid. As referenced, students must possess the willingness and motivation to engage with the programs and services that exist. Continuing to address effective challenges hindering students from utilizing available resources that positively impact their success is an ongoing effort.

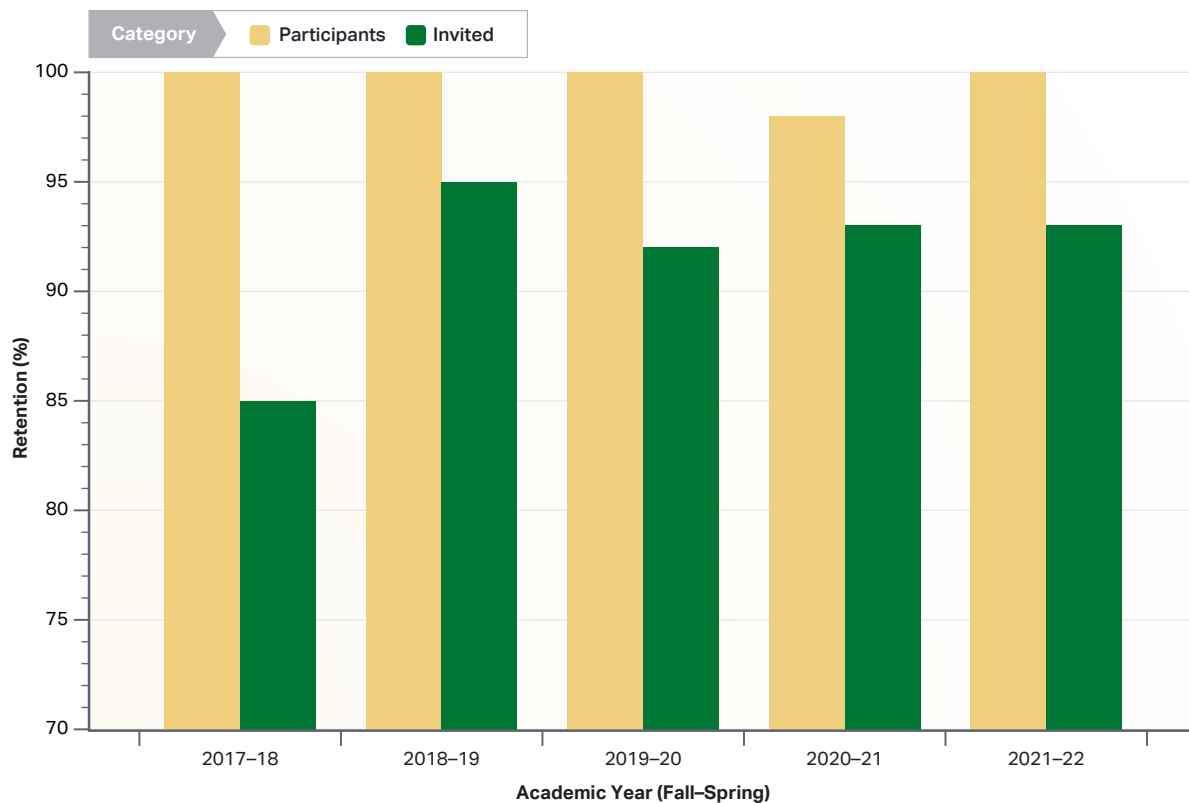


FIGURE 1 ➤ Fall to Spring Persistence Rates

Implications

Institutions interested in working to increase student persistence should first understand the causes of student attrition. Assessing the persistence rates of students who perform below certain GPA thresholds after the first semester, could give justification for launching a GPAid-like program. The GPA thresholds can vary based on institutional analysis.

Institutions might also consider launching a GPAid-like program for at-risk students in the first semester of freshman year before facing academic hardship. Institutions could also consider operating a summer bridge GPAid-like program in advance of the first semester for at-risk students. Each of these potential opportunities involves doing institutional analysis to determine, historically, who the at-risk students are. This could involve assessing admissions information about high school GPA, students from certain geographic areas

with higher attrition rates, students from certain demographic backgrounds, or students with higher levels of demonstrated financial need.

Limitations

One challenge associated with assessing the effectiveness of GPAid concerns opt-in bias. For students who opt in to GPAid, arguments could be made that they are more motivated to succeed versus students who do not opt in to the program. From this perspective, should a control group of students be built for those who are eligible but are not offered the full suite of GPAid services? This crosses ethical research lines, as knowingly not offering some students needed and available services is not appropriate. With this consideration, knowing the full impact of GPAid for those who opt in versus those who do not, remains uncertain.

A similar challenge has been the consideration of requiring GPAid for students who are not meeting the minimum academic standards within their academic program of study. However, given the nature of GPAid, this requires dedication of time and effort from students outside their core academic program, so requiring participation has not been pursued.

Another ongoing challenge being considered focuses on offering incentives for participation in addition to the current financial incentives. UM has found that students who most frequently opt in to GPAid are those whose financial assistance is at risk. The ability to create additional value for the program that is easily explained to students has proven challenging, as other program benefits are more qualitative in nature, such as possessing better study skills and time management abilities, as well as the hope for an improved academic record. These longer-term benefits do not seem to have significant enough appeal to attract students to the program. Thus, the opt-in rate has typically hovered around 48 percent. Knowing the program outcomes, it would be optimal if more students opted in.

Summary

GPAid improves student academic performance and persistence at UM. Students who successfully complete GPAid have increased their term-over-term GPA by nearly one grade point, while non-participants see less than a half point increase in academic performance (0.97 point increase for participants versus 0.48 increase for non-participants). Most significant is that GPAid participants retain at 100 percent. This is 7 percentage points higher than the university average. Identifying students who struggle academically in the first semester and offering a free program that provides enrichment activities, with a financial incentive to participate, improves academic outcomes and institutional affinity. A program for first-year students that includes self-assessment on behavior and attitudes that may have negatively impacted the first term—including four mandatory academic advising sessions, institutional support through academic workshops, and counseling center education and alignment with financial aid persistence requirements—positively impacted student success at UM.

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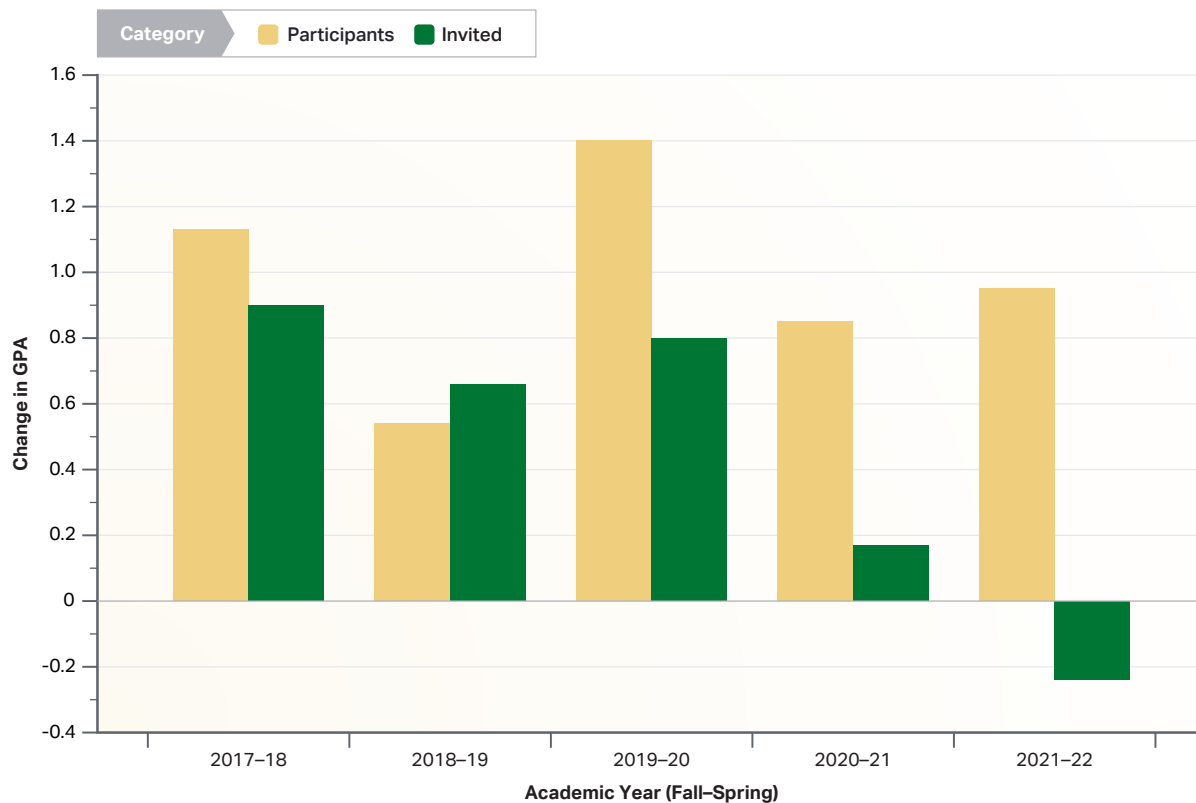


FIGURE 2 ➤ Change in Term GPA from Fall to Spring

About the Authors



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