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Three ways to use motivational data to intervene with college students

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by [Janene Panfil](#)

It is well recognized and accepted that student success and completion is multivariate and complex. My colleagues [Tim Culver](#) and [Lew Sanborne](#) have blogged about the importance of a data informed annual retention plan, using multiple data points.

I'd like to dig into just one of those multiple variables we talk so much about, student motivation. Non-cognitive student motivation data enhances campus early-alert programs. Early-alert programs and programs designed to serve at-risk students are regularly cited by campus practitioners as one of the top 10 most effective retention strategies. Like the overall retention plan, these programs are more successful when they are data driven.

The best early-alert programs identify incoming at-risk students before they even enroll and prioritize interventions for those who could most benefit. After enrollment, you want to identify students experiencing academic, social, and/or personal problems that might be addressed by institutional intervention.

The way campuses use the [Noel-Levitz Retention Management System Plus](#) illustrates how motivational assessment can provide a significant advantage with student success programs. This system is a suite of non-cognitive motivational assessments and predictive modeling that gauges students' likelihood of persisting. Campuses use these data to identify at-risk students and student receptivity to institutional support. Using the data, their advising programs, academic support services, mentoring programs, and career services programs target students who indicate both a need and a desire for assistance.

Below are three examples of successful strategies for using data in early-alert initiatives:

1. Identify students with low academic confidence

Students who exhibit a low sense of academic confidence (study habits, math and science confidence, and verbal and written confidence) are an at-risk student population, even those who had strong academic records in high school or at prior campuses. These students should be targeted for academic support services. As a second touch, those students also indicating greater receptivity to academic assistance can be targeted with another communication reminding them of the resources available to them. Further, in one-on-one conversations, advisors can probe about the amount of time the student plans to study, prior approaches to difficult assignments, and what type of academic help was most beneficial in the past.

2. Engage students showing a low desire to finish college

This is another major flag, but it's also one that can be addressed through early, targeted



Using student motivational assessment data, there are key ways to target and influence students and help them succeed.



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intervention. Engage students exhibiting a low desire to finish college through major and career exploration opportunities, service learning, and internship programs. Often tying academic learning to a concrete career and the long-term benefits of education can boost a student's commitment to degree completion. Those who are receptive to career and personal counseling can again be targeted for customized outreach. Advisors can explore prior academic success, degree aspirations, and family support and involvement issues.

3. Connect students with financial insecurity to the appropriate resources

Many students indicate a low sense of financial security—our most recent data show that 30 percent of incoming freshmen and almost 40 percent of first-generation freshmen have financial problems that are “very distracting and troublesome.” While student need level and the cost of tuition is out of your control, you can connect these students with financial literacy programs to enhance their personal financial management and budgeting. Helping students evaluate the consequences of working excessive hours per week or moving to a part-time status is equally important. Many students are looking for a part-time or summer job; the more you can tie these jobs to their intended major and career aspiration, the better. And keeping jobs on-campus as much as possible is a great student engagement opportunity.

One final note: Don't forget to track your success. Now that you've identified and interacted with students, be sure to track utilization of your support services, changes in the persistence rate, changes in academic progress/probation rates, changes in the retention rate, and changes in student motivation at mid-year and in their second year. Reviewing and evaluating these results will allow you to fine tune programs, celebrate your success, and support ongoing and additional institution investments. Data can be used to support reallocation of scarce dollars and justify expansion of services in many cases.

Next month, my colleagues Beth Richter and Jo Hillman will offer a free Webinar on using motivational and early-alert data to target interventions, [How We Retain More Students by Intervening Earlier](#). They'll discuss strategies for identifying at-risk students and connecting them with campus resources, along with case studies from three campuses on their intervention initiatives.

If you have additional questions or would like to discuss how to set up more strategic student success initiatives on your campus, please [send me an e-mail](#).

About the author



Janene Panfil serves Noel-Levitz as senior vice president for retention solutions while providing legal counsel for the firm. She gives leadership to developing, implementing, and enhancing the firm's tools for student success, including early-alert systems, student assessment instruments, and quality service training. She holds a JD from the University of Iowa.

[Read more about Janene's experience and expertise »](#)

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