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and the Disruptive
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in Higher Education**

**A Personal
Approach**

Strengthening the total student life cycle with personal branding, positive reinforcement

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Unleashing the Power of Positive Reinforcement

Focus on student values is key to successful retention strategies

By Seth Saunders, Exceptional Consulting Group

To build a solid and sustainable retention plan, there must be focus, determination and a strategy that will help positively influence each student to not only remain in school but also graduate.

Think about these questions: How do you feel when you've made a difference in someone's life? What are you willing to do to help others achieve their goals? What can you do to influence more students to stay in school? While these questions are personal, answering them will have a dramatic impact on the entire institution you work for, especially students in your institution.

It is amazing what can happen when one person makes up his or her mind to positively influence those students he or she works with. Just think of the impact when the administration, faculty and staff of an entire university make up their collective minds to positively influence their students. In higher education, there is continual movement and focus on ensuring that universities are making diligent efforts to retain their students.

For some schools, this has been a part of their core strategy since the beginning. But others are scrambling to try many different strategies to see what works. The problem



is, as these strategies are tested, students are lost; thus they are not benefiting from their education, and the university is not benefiting from having more alumni.

Universities often spend lots of money trying to develop the right enrollment strategies, programs and resources to get new students. Many have found success as they have focused on enrollment strategies and have made commitments to achieve success. However, a backlash of sorts has begun as these same institutions see major problems with their retention and now have to rearrange budgets to try to save students.

Unfortunately, many students have suffered because of a lack of resources focused on retention. If there were more attention on students' values, there would be a dramatic increase in not only retention but also graduation. A simple analogy: If you try to build a house with lots of wood glue rather than by using the right nails and screws for each section of the house, your house will not weather the storms. So it is with a university's retention strategy. You must focus on students' values so there is a deep-rooted connection that can weather the challenges they will face as they pursue their goal of earning a degree.

It is extremely important to understand the influence necessary to help students remain in school and graduate. It seems as though some universities are taking the approach of focusing more attention on the front-end student experience. Included in this is a variety of assessments to help students not only identify what their own personal values are, but also understand how those will help them throughout their program.

Almost 10 years later, it is evident that had this recommendation been taken seriously by more institutions, there most likely would not be the issues many are dealing with in regard to retaining students. One can determine students' characteristics and needs only by getting to know them and their values.

Making a connection between students' values and their educational experience

If there was more attention on students' values, there would be a dramatic increase in not only retention but also graduation.

In a study by ACT in 2004, "The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention," the authors made a number of recommendations. Their No. 1 recommendation was: "Determine their student characteristics and needs; set priorities among these areas of need; identify available resources; evaluate a variety of successful programs; and implement a formal, comprehensive retention program that best meets their institutional needs."

will improve retention. The key is to have a positive influence on each student, whether as a member of the university faculty, staff or administration. Each of these roles can exert a positive influence.

As an influencer, one has the opportunity to inspire, direct, mediate, listen and provide effective feedback to students. Taking a quick look at the definition of influence, we read the following: "The power to change or affect someone or something:

the power to cause changes without directly forcing them to happen; a person or thing that affects someone or something in an important way.”

Taking into account these definitions, it becomes obvious how understanding what students’ values are – and then connecting them to their educational experience – can have a tremendous impact on improving retention. It is critical to understand that this is not some easy fix and that effectively implementing this type of culture will take time. Efforts must be made to learn more about what students value and believe as they begin their journey in higher education so that the right kind of positive influence can take place, especially during those more challenging times for students.

In the learning notes from The IDEA Center under the topic “Developing a clearer understanding of, and commitment to, personal values,” the authors stated: “One of the ideal purposes of a college

education is to educate the whole person. To be wholly educated, students must define, understand, refine and commit to their own personal values. One definition of values makes it clear why clarification of, and commitment to, personal values serves students and the educational process.”

This could be a great starting point for any retention program at any institution. As there are diligent and consistent efforts to help students clarify their values and then provide the right support and resources to help them succeed, there can be more time spent actually working with students rather than on programs to help students. As this is done, the influence that takes place will be measurable. But just as important, this will be an example to the students being influenced. They will then have a model that they can use as they go through both their education and life journeys. Now that is something all those associated with higher education should highly value.



Seth Saunders, President of Exceptional Consulting Group, has been a higher education executive for more than 13 years. His experience includes both domestic and international education. He is involved with a number of nonprofits, including sitting on the board of directors for the Urban League of Hampton Roads, the Virginia Beach Forum and the Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce. He is also Secretary for the Rotary Club of Hampton Roads and CEO and Co-founder of The Pink Shoe Hero Foundation, an organization focused on empowering youth to reach their full potential. Saunders can be reached at exceptionalcg@gmail.com.

