# STUDENT ATTRITION, STUDENT RETENTION: RETENTION STRATEGIES AT UNIVERSITIES IN THE SOUTH

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**Abstract**

Universities in the South face various unique challenges such as a dearth in internet services, transportation challenges, course offerings, and online learning. Students also face challenges including transitioning to college, integrating into the campus community, and financial hardships. As a result, there is an increase in student attrition. This article presents advice on best practices that can guide administrators and educators in retaining students, particularly in universities in the South. The article uses Tinto's (1993) student integration theory which primarily focuses on factors that contribute to student retention. Implications from the article suggest that family support, referral programs, internships, free Wi-Fi and other strategies are effective in retaining students particularly in universities in the South.

**Keywords**: student retention, internships, student attrition, retention strategies, Tinto's integration theory

**Introduction**

Students do not intend to drop out of college or university when they first enroll. However, unfavorable circumstances within and without the school compel students to withdraw from school (Taylor, 2005). Student attrition usually takes place during the first two years of college primarily as a result of (1) challenges transitioning to college, (2) roadblocks integrating into the campus community, and (3) lack of student involvement (Tinto, 2006). Transportation challenges also contribute to student attrition. Lack of access to personal vehicles compels students to rely on buses. However, some students continue to face hardships; because some of them (1) are not able to afford bus passes, (2) bus stops or bus stations are far from students' homes, school, and places of work, and (3) bus routes and times do not align with students' schedules (West, 2021). Internet challenges also contribute to student attrition. Southern states including Mississippi, Alabama and Oklahoma, have the highest percentage of students impacted by a dearth in internet services (Sullivan, 2021). Financial hardships and low internet connectivity (e.g., low speeds) hinder students from accessing the internet, which is essential for online learning, communicating with teachers, conducting research, and using learning management systems (e.g., Canvas) to complete assignments (Lynch, 2017). As a result of these hardships students eventually drop out and are unable to continue pursuing their academic and professional goals.

**Theoretical Framework**

Tinto's (1993) student integration theory is the theoretical framework for this article. Tinto's student integration theory primarily focuses on factors that can contribute to student retention. Students who are able to affiliate with faculty, students, and personnel in higher education environments successfully graduate from the university (Chrysikos et al., 2017). Students who are not able to affiliate drop out of the university. According to Tinto (1993) three main conditions should be met in order for students to persevere and refrain from dropping out of school despite life challenges. The conditions include: (1) Students should have access to retention programs that support and meet their needs, (2) retention programs should focus on all students, and (3) successful retention programs should offer a degree of integration for students in both social and academic communities (Chrysikos, et al., 2017). Further, students should have the opportunity to develop social and academic integration skills in informal and formal ways (Chrysikos et al., 2017). Informal social integration entails interaction with peers, whereas formal social integration entails extracurricular activities. Higher levels of interaction can lead to higher levels of student persistence and graduation (Tinto, 1993). Interaction with peers can transform students into self-actualized young adults who are productive citizens in their local communities. Formal social integration includes researching topics in the library, attending labs and classes, and engagement in various activities related to academic success (Chrysikos et al., 2017). Formal social integration also entails interaction with personnel and faculty which has a positive effect on students' retention.

**Purpose of the Article**

Research has revealed factors that contribute to student attrition. This article imparts advice on best practices that can help administrators and educators retain students, particularly in universities in the South. Universities in the south face various unique challenges such as a dearth in internet services, transportation challenges, course offerings, and online learning. As a result of these challenges, this article aims to provide and impart information on effective retention strategies for universities in the South.

## Retention Strategies

Positive and proactive experiences can increase college student retention, student transition, and integration to college. This process consists of adaptation to college life, social and academic integration, engagement in extracurricular activities, and peer involvement (Tinto, 2006). Academic institutions can offer orientation programs (e.g., outdoor orientation), effective academic advising, academic support services (e.g., writing centers, career centers, and learning centers), courses, seminars, or colloquiums to support new students in the transition from high school to college (Bell, 2006; Bell et al., 2014; Padgett et al., 2013; Kuh, 2005; Lau, 2003). Addressing transportation and internet challenges by issuing students free bus passes and car ride sharing services, ensuring buses and cars have free Wi-Fi for students to utilize during the commute significantly contribute to student retention (Herder, 2021; Lynch, 2017). Educational institutions also provide free hot spots for students, purchase internet for low-income families, and partner with towns

and cities to provide Wi-Fi so that students can have access to internet and in turn they are motivated to continue pursuing their personal goals (Campus Technology Staff, 2020).

Strategies that support and enhance student retention should reflect and address student needs and circumstances. They should be designed and implemented to support students to achieve their academic goals (Maine Public Universities, 2022). Peer and faculty mentoring programs are effective in increasing student retention because they are able to address students' diverse needs and eliminate obstacles that may hinder student success (Maine Public Universities, 2022). Effective teaching practices and professional development also contribute to student retention particularly for online learners (Snyder et al., 2019).

Students taught by faculty who are experts in their field and have advanced professional development training are likely to persist and graduate from the university (usm.edu). Academic advisement positively contributes to student retention. Academic advising "exerts a significant impact on student retention through its positive association with (1) student satisfaction with the college experience, (2) effective educational and career planning and decision making, (3) student utilization of campus support services, (4) student-faculty contact outside the classroom, and (5) student mentoring" (Cuseo, n.d. p. 1). As a retention strategy academic advising provides students with moral support and acumen for personal and professional development that motivates students to persist in their academic career particularly during challenging times.

Support systems are advantageous for all students. Referral programs significantly enhance student retention because they provide additional college resources that they

need for their personal and professional development (McAughtrie, 2016). Early alert

systems and support systems (i.e., advising and tutoring) are another effective technique

that can increase student retention. Early alert systems state that "treatment of student

needs and problems should occur as early as possible in the student career and should be

approached in an integrated fashion" (Tinto, 2012, p. 171). Early alert systems are

primarily beneficial for first-year students, student-athletes, and at risk students (students

with academic difficulties).

Family support is particularly salient for students who are embarking on a university

degree. First year students have to adjust to a new environment, develop new friendships,

and engage in new and challenging modes of independent learning. Availability of family

support may compensate for lack of social integration at the university. That is, students who

are unable to form strong friendships and bonds; closeness to family can compensate for

issues with loneliness. However, if family support is not available, students might not have

compensatory mechanisms available to deal with social isolation and loneliness at

university, thereby leading to a higher likelihood of dropping out. Students who feel

homesick may take steps to withdraw while those with greater family support are more

likely to persist (Nicpon et al., 2006). Occasionally students from other countries may not

have immediate family support. In situations as such, teachers, advisors and coaches should

be ready and available to provide students with sufficient support similar to what the

students would receive from family.

**Internship Opportunities**

Internships are instrumental and vital for student success. They provide students with the opportunity to apply the academic knowledge they have acquired in the real world and in their professional careers. Internships are positively related to both student retention and graduation (Khraishi et al., 2020). Internships are helpful to students who need additional financial assistance, particularly low-income students who are likely to work off campus. Studies reveal that students who work off campus are less likely to complete their degrees, with the risk of dropping out (Tyson, 2012). Internships provide students with financial assistance, and also keep them on track in their scholarly work (Kharishi et al., 2020). Thus, internships are not just an additional source of income, but they also contribute to student retention.

**Additional Financial Resources**

Family inheritance, trust funds, educational grants, and scholarships play a key role in student retention because they provide students with the opportunity to focus on their academic pursuits (Cornwell et al., 2005). However, not all students have access to these types of resources. Students from low-income families may have a weaker support system and must pay for college themselves with no financial or moral support or guidance (Gatto, 2020). As a result, students may have to work full time and attend college, which may negatively impact their grades as they focus on their job and coursework at the same time (Gatto, 2020). However, availability of mentors, scholarships and fellowships targeted at low-income students (e.g., Gates Millennium Scholars), may address students' financial needs eliminating the need for students to work (Knox, 2024). Further, administrators and

educators can implement best practices including relationship building skills, financial literacy, and time management skills, to support students with no family support.

## Conclusion

Students do not intend to drop out of college or university. However, adverse circumstances within and outside the school force students to withdraw from school (Taylor, 2005). To retain students, universities use a variety of strategies that focus on addressing students' academic and personal needs with the hope that students will persist and graduate. Family support, referral programs, peer and mentoring programs, effective teaching practices, academic advising, free Wi-Fi, and car ride sharing services have been effective in retaining students particularly in universities in the South. However, there is still a dire need to find solutions that eliminate student attrition and enhance student success. Educational institutions may need to form partnerships with families and communities because they are students' strongest support system who truly understand their academic, personal, and professional needs.

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