

# Zeroing in on Online Retention Issues

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Retention has always been an issue in higher education, but it is particularly important in online learning. “We’re at the mercy of high disenrollment rates; five to 17 times higher than in a face-to-face environment,” says Phil Ice, vice president of research and development for the American Public University System (APUS).

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This retention problem is all the more disheartening because of the efficacy of online course delivery. In a paper on the subject, co-authored with APUS president and CEO Wallace E. Boston (“Assessing Retention in Online Learning: An Administrative Perspective,” *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*), Ice cites U.S. Department of Education research that finds “online learning is more effective than face-to-face learning.”

To better understand the issues surrounding online student retention, Ice and Boston conducted a study of more than 20,000 APUS students to determine the factors which correlate with student success and persistence. The results point to factors that may be in play at other institutions, although follow-on research indicates that each institution will need to do further study to discover its own unique factors.

## **The crucial transfer credit**

Many institutions of higher education have a bit of trepidation with transfer credit, particularly when working with the adult students who often find online programs most convenient. The fear is that accepting too much transfer credit will encourage the student to take fewer classes at the transfer institution or may even dilute the control the institution has over the degree. However, Ice found that, far from being detrimental, transfer credit is one of the most important factors for student persistence.

In Ice’s initial study, the most important predictor of failure to persist is lack of transfer credit. In the study’s initial sample, over 80 percent of APUS students had some transfer credit, while just over 3,500 individuals brought zero credits into their APUS study. Of these 3,500 students, almost three-quarters disenrolled. Even more troubling is that this population accounted for 40 percent of those who disenrolled from the entire initial survey sample.

Ice explains that having transfer credit is a good proxy for measuring the student’s ability to succeed in college-level studies. “Having any transfer credit at all is college experience,” he says. “We can’t take it for [granted] that students have those skills.”

However, just as important is the fact that students need the “head start” of transfer credit to help them finish their degree program in a timely manner. In their paper, Boston and Ice explain: “With students averaging 3.58 courses completed per year in 2007, a bachelor’s degree-seeking student taking the average number of courses would not complete a degree within the 10 year period allowed. Increasing the number of courses taken per year would be a logical solution but may not be a practical solution given the demands placed on working adults, particularly those with families.” Clearly, for a student to persist, he or she needs to feel that success is within reach. Transfer credit helps the student see the light at the end of the tunnel.

## **A unique “profile of success”**

Going hand-in-hand with transfer credits is total number of registrations, which was the next

predictor of possible disenrollment. “Activity really mattered—keeping students on track,” Ice says. Intuitively, the more classes a student takes, the more involved he or she is in the institution, and the more quickly he or she earns a degree. In the paper, Boston and Ice explain: “For example, if the pool of active students averaged six courses per year, the time to completion for a student with a mean of 41 transfer credit hours would be four and a half years versus seven years when the student takes an average of four courses per year.” Clearly, students taking more credit proceed to degree completion more quickly, but additional research underway by Ice points to the need for institutions of higher education to take this finding with caution, as there is typically a profile of success at each institution that may indicate the course load most likely to predict success.

### **Grades received**

The next three factors most predictive of disenrollment were if the student received an F or a W in their last class, or if the student had a 4.0 GPA. Surprisingly, all factors were positively correlated with disenrollment.

- ***The receipt of a grade of F or W makes intuitive sense.*** As APUS has a large military component to its student body, these students must abide by Department of Defense regulations on tuition assistance. Since the student will not be reimbursed for future classes taken until the grade of F or W is resolved, this stumbling block can be enough to make a student stop out or drop out of their program. Certainly, a student who did not wish to resolve the F or W grade would be faced with paying for his or her future courses, certainly a stumbling block that is difficult to overcome.
- ***More interesting is the fact that having a GPA of 4.0 is predictive of disenrollment.*** In their paper, Boston and Ice point to data that suggest that some students disenroll because they perceive that the program is too easy; another explanation could be that these high-achievers elect to transfer to another institution once they have amassed a quality record at APUS. For this last group, the students may be individually successful in persisting until graduation, but they may not be finishing their careers as APUS graduates.
- ***Overall, this tendency for students to transfer credits in and out of an institution may be a sign of how higher education is being used by students in the current era.*** In their paper, Boston and Ice explain: “First, the high amount of variance accounted for by the presence of transfer credit, and the tendency of a significant number of students to disenroll after two courses, indicates that initial attempts at college enrollment may be more exploratory than in the traditional university.” It is easy to see how students returning to college might decide to try their hand at an online course or two before committing to a program of study at the online program or at a traditional university. “Swirling, a term coined to define students taking classes or attending two or more institutions before graduating from college, appears to be a trend,” they write.
- ***“Second, activity should be considered a primary catalyst for degree completion,”*** the authors write. This is a prime opportunity for academic advisors to work with students to set expectations about the path to degree completion and to keep students engaged in working toward the degree.

### **Taking the next steps**

To further understand the issues surrounding student retention, WCET, the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies, has received funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In their most recent study, APUS has taken a lead [role](#) on PAR, the Predictive

Analytics Reporting Framework, which it describes as “a longitudinal data-mining project centered on conducting large-scale analyses of federated data sets contributed by postsecondary institutions with the goal to better understand student loss and momentum.” The initial study aggregated data from six institutions.

With these institutions, the biggest predictor of disenrollment was “taking too many courses,” says Ice, a finding which highlights the balance needed between keeping students progressing and possibly overloading them.

However, the big take-away was “factors for success were more complicated than in the initial studies,” says Ice. “The chances of success were determined by factors that were institutionally unique.” So, while number of initial transfer credits might be important at one institution, they may be less so at another institution.

The emerging complexity of the data points to the need for a way to understand the type of student who is most likely to succeed at any given institution, and then match that student to the institution. “We need an eHarmony for higher ed,” Ice says.

Ice points out that this current study looks at only six institutions, while there are potentially several million student records across the U.S. that could provide information about the recipe for student success at any given institution. He advances the hope that one day a national data clearinghouse or the like could help construct profiles of student success at various institution types or specific institutions, as well as allowing time to dig more deeply into student characteristics and behaviors as well as more institutions. It is research like this that brings us one step closer to the common goal of finding the right institution for the right student.