



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## RETENTION ISSUES IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

It seems that each time the spring semester rolls around, we have increased retention issues. As a result, retention efforts were the topic of a recent conversation in the Transitional English department. Much of the literature I have seen on retention issues focuses on student retention from semester to semester, but for me the focus has been retention within a semester. When the topic of retention comes up in my department, the conversation inevitably turns to, "What can I do to retain my students? What could I have done better?" It is a necessary conversation, and I find it especially worthy because it shows our department members' dedication to student success. What I always find mildly frustrating is the belief that faculty members' actions (or inaction) could be the sole reason students either stay or leave school. That is not to say that faculty have *nothing* to do with retention and success. Our department actually has great success with faculty interventions of students, so I do know that the faculty member has a lot of influence on students' commitment to the class. However, I believe that the success of faculty interventions depends on the type of issue that is preventing the student from coming to class or completing work. If it is an academic issue, then the interventions work well because students are able to get help from their faculty member. However, if the issues are financial, health, or family related (or a combination of any of these), then it becomes much more difficult for a faculty member to help in that situation. Even if a student is willing to continue coming to class despite those issues, the student may need some accommodations that a faculty member may be unwilling to give. For instance, the student may have fallen behind in class work and may try to catch up with a late assignment, making him or her late for assignments that may be due now. Should the instructor allow the student to turn all the work in late in order to help retain the student? If the instructor chooses to do so, will this set the student up for failure in future courses when the same amount of support and understanding is not present?

This conversation cannot be complete without looking at the admission policies of the college.

As an open-admissions institution, there is a wide gamut of types of students who come through our doors. Some are traditional students without too many responsibilities, while others are laden with responsibilities, notwithstanding the age in which they come. Since research has demonstrated that high-risk students are less likely to succeed in school, then we must either consider adjusting our classroom policies to accommodate well-meaning students who have an overwhelming amount of risk factors, or we need to consider revising how "open" our admissions process is. Even though all community colleges have an open-admissions policy, enrollment can be affected by indirect policies. For instance, in February 2013, *Inside Higher Ed* ran an article about Klamath Community College's decision to help increase student retention by implementing measures such as mandatory advising and orientation and eliminating late registration. Of course, these measures impacted their enrollment, and the college took a financial cut because of it, but the hope is that the students who remain will be more likely to persist.

Conversations about retention and success issues at community colleges can be likened to those about women in the workplace (fanned by the release of *Lean In* written by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg) and the ever-present question of "Can a woman have it all?" However, I feel that this is the question we need to ask at the community college—can a community college student with multiple risk factors have it all? In this case I would define "all" as the ability to enter an open-admissions institution of higher education whose classroom policies mirror that of non-open-enrollment institutions, all the while having significant risk factors, and still succeed and remain in the classroom.

Furthermore, can a community college expect a student with significant risk factors to adhere to the same types of inflexible standards that other institutions have and expect similar results? Can using indirect measures help make the admissions process less "open?" Should expectations of student success and retention in the face of overwhelming external factors be modified?

I do not have the answers to these questions, but I do know that it would be beneficial to have these types of conversations in conjunction with the conversations that we have in regards to what we as faculty can do in

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the classroom to help students succeed. These broader conversations will help paint a comprehensive picture of student success and may be the key to finding solutions that can actually make a substantial dent in our student success and retention numbers over the long term.

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