



# University Purpose Networks:

## Online Communities for Student Retention and Success

*This white paper explores best practices to optimize the use of purpose networks for student retention and success. A brief review of the retention literature is presented, followed by an introduction to the concept of purpose networks in higher education. Purpose networks are discussed as they relate to learning outcomes, orientation, mentoring, and intrusive academic advising. Preliminary data on effectiveness are also discussed.*

*Retention continues to gain momentum as a global topic of interest; therefore, footnotes are provided for audiences not directly familiar with student success theories.*

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### Introduction

Student enrollments have increased more than 25 percent during the past 15 years and are expected to increase by an additional 17 percent by 2014, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2006). Subsequently, the number of baccalaureate degrees conferred is expected to increase by 22 percent. However, despite rapid increases in enrollment, recent data from the ACT Institutional Data Questionnaire (ACT, 2008a) indicate that the average first-year retention across 2,582 two- and four-year institutions is currently 65.7 percent. That is, over one-third of first-year students transfer or drop out of postsecondary institutions each year. What might be more surprising is that despite advances in research and theory in understanding first-year retention, data from ACT (2008b) also indicate that the retention rate has remained stable or dropped for the better part of two decades. In 1988, the average first-year retention rate in private four-year colleges was 76.2 percent; in 2008, 72.9 percent. In 1988, the average first-year retention rate in public four-year colleges was 74.5 percent; in 2008, 72.3 percent. The five-year graduation rate has also decreased at these same colleges, from 55.2 percent in 1988 to 52.5 percent in 2008 across public and private institutions.

Despite advances in research & theory, student retention has remained stable or dropped for the better part of two decades.

Though the rate of enrollment has increased and the rate of retention has decreased, the resources allocated to retention-specific initiatives continue to be significantly lower than those allocated to recruitment. Student success theorists have identified gaps in resources between recruitment and retention and recommended fiscal strategies built around global retention that increase ROI—yet school budgets still do not reflect an equitable distribution between the two. While we all know recruitment requires a great deal of resources to get students through the doors, this paper discusses ways to continue building modern retention strategies.

We still struggle to find personnel at any level who state retention is their top priority.

As retention trends downward across most universities in the United States, some schools have chosen to build upon the retention literature and leverage technology and peer-to-peer media as part of a focused retention strategy. Below we describe some ways traditional retention practices can be enhanced through the use of what are called “purpose networks,” or a purposeful and intentional form of online community.

### Closing the Gap Between Research and Practice

More than 30 years ago Astin<sup>1</sup> recognized that the resources and budget directed toward retention paled in comparison to the resources directed toward recruiting. To this, he argued, “In four-year institutions, any change that deters students from dropping out can affect three classes of students at once, whereas any change in recruiting practices can affect only one class in a given year. From this viewpoint, investing

1 Alexander W. Astin is the Allan M. Cartter Professor of Higher Education Emeritus at the University of California, Los Angeles and Founding Director of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. He is also the Founding Director of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, an ongoing national study of some 12 million students; 250,000 faculty and staff; and 1,800 higher education institutions. Dr. Astin is considered the most frequently cited author in the field of higher education and a leading theorist on student success in college.

resources to prevent dropping out may be more cost effective than applying the same resources to more vigorous recruitment” (Astin, 1975, p. 2). Bean and Hossler (1990) more recently wrote that successfully retaining one student for four years is fiscally equivalent to enrolling four new students who attrit during their first year.

Fast-forward to the present—little has changed. Many institutions provide ample resources for recruiting while retention resources continue to lag far behind. School budgets confirm the relative high importance placed on recruiting initiatives vs. retention initiatives from a monetary perspective. The line items of university budgets reveal imbalances between recruitment (often listed under “search”) and retention (typically having no line item associated to this term). Recruitment purchase orders fall among larger purchases such as branding/advertising (which have separate budgets of their own), construction and food. At one institution we noted a “search” purchase order for the amount of \$200,000 listed in line with payments toward water and energy. We also noted the only line item with the word “retention” in it was for a retention conference. Additionally, in a survey of over 200 higher education administrators conducted in June 2009 by EducationDynamics, respondents were asked about their budgets for resources such as e-mail, phone, chat, social networking, content, consulting, and other tools and services. Those respondents whose primary focus is prospective students are twice as likely to have a budget of over \$20,000. What’s more, on a personnel level, our analysis of the Higher Education Directory indicates the number of U.S. university administrators whose top priority is identified as retention is staggeringly low. Out of 86,518 names in the 2008 Higher Education Directory for the United States, the number of college and university administrators with the word “retention” in their title is 69. Add the number of administrators with “student success” in their title, and the tally increases to 154. The number of college and university administrators with the terms “admissions”, “enrollment” and “recruitment” in their title is 5,041. While there are personnel responsible for areas such as “student services” (987), “student affairs” (1,355) and “academic affairs” (1,801), as well as those focusing on first-year experience and/or advising, there are still few institutions to put a single person in charge of the some of the most widely reported statistics in higher education—retention and graduation rates.

College student *purpose* networks, unlike the *social* networks (such as MySpace and Facebook), intentionally create the academic and social communities essential for university life.

Challenges to enhancing retention have not, however, been the result of lacking research. Integrating a wide variety of research, scholars such as Astin, Tinto<sup>2</sup>, Bean<sup>3</sup> and Kuh<sup>4</sup> have developed models to explain student persistence or attrition over students’ educational careers. Tinto (1993) argues that academic and social integration, defined by the sharing of academic values and developing of friendships with students, staff and faculty, is essential to ensure student retention. Students remain committed to their institutions by taking on the characteristics, goals and values of their university peers and faculty to evolve

a new identity. Bean (Bean & Hossler, 1990; Bean & Eaton, 2002) argues that the quality of interaction with

2 Vincent Tinto is Distinguished University Professor at Syracuse University. He has carried out research and has written extensively on higher education, particularly on student success and the impact of learning communities on student growth and attainment. His book *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* is considered a seminal work of retention literature.

3 John Bean is the co-author of, among other titles, “The Psychology Underlying Successful Retention Practices,” which describes the psychological processes that lead to academic and social integration based on a retention model proposed by the authors (Bean & Eaton, 2000). It also describes how successful retention programs such as learning communities, freshman interest groups, tutoring and orientation rely on psychological processes.

4 George D. Kuh is Chancellor’s Professor of Higher Education and Director, Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University, Bloomington. His research includes assessing student and institutional performance to enhance student success. Kuh founded the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). He is the author of *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter* and *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*. He is considered a leading theorist on student success practices such as engagement.

the university, in relationship to the student's background, goals, family support and experiences, is a valued predictor of student retention. These interactions lend themselves to students developing a perception of goodness of fit, which is crucial for retention.

Consistent components of theories of retention are the frequency, duration and quality of student integration into university life, both academically and socially. As such, the development of student-to-student and student-to-faculty academic communities have been instrumental in success (Kuh, 2008). Social integration and community building elements are key aspects to each of these educational interventions, relying on student discussions, common ground and a platform for social discussion with a common educational purpose. However, many of these initiatives have struggled to reach all students outside of the classroom or the physical/geographical community to promote campus-wide involvement.

Progressive universities are capitalizing on these platforms by creating focused, intentional online purpose networks to facilitate their institutional goals.

Web-based communication platforms have emerged as one possible solution. Since the expansion of the Internet in universities during the 1990s, more college-aged students (18–24) and high school-aged students (12–17) have gone online than has the general U.S. population, with 89–93 percent of these populations currently using Web-based resources (Jones, 2009). Not only do college students report they use the Internet more than the library on campus, but they spend more hours during the day online than studying for classes (Jones, 2002). With 97 percent of college students owning a computer (Roos, 2006), and all students having Internet access on campuses, online interventions can target and reach nearly each and every college student. Furthermore, about 80 percent of the college students surveyed respond that the Internet has had a positive impact on their overall academic experience (Jones, 2002).

Progressive universities are capitalizing on Web-based platforms by creating focused, intentional online purpose networks to facilitate their institutional goals. In a college student purpose network, universities seek to instill and provide platforms to support institutional learning outcomes. College student purpose networks, unlike the social networks (such as MySpace and Facebook), intentionally create the academic and social communities essential for university life. They are bi-directional communicative platforms going far above and beyond e-mail as a means of communication. In fact, e-mail is becoming less effective as a platform for student communication and social support, and students are moving toward online community networking to build and communicate with their peer network. According to the 2009 Pew Report (Jones, 2009), e-mail use has dropped among teens from 89 percent in 2004 to 73 percent in 2009—below the percentage of teens reporting playing games online.

Purpose networks are beginning to be viewed as vital to enhancing student engagement and retention while not sacrificing institutional mission. In fact, they can be used as tools to support mission. Fortunately, institutions do not need to start from scratch to implement a strong purpose network. Often, purpose networks are an extension of tools and strategies already in place.

## Purpose Network Defined

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In higher education, a purpose network is an online community intentionally designed to support critical student learning outcomes through peer-to-peer, peer-to-staff and staff-to-peer communication. College student **purpose** networks, unlike **social** networks, create the academic and social communities essential for success in university life.

## Does Your School Have a Purpose Network? 7 Question Checklist

- *Does the network provide online mentoring opportunities or other online models for student success?*
- *Can it be used for social and academic purposes?*
- *Does it drive learning outcomes?*
- *Have student input and campus demographics influenced the content in your network?*
- *Have students validated their outcomes via post-tests?*
- *Are tracking and assessment tools being deployed to measure success?*
- *Is your network bi-directional such that you get feedback from students that is meaningful and actionable?*

### Four Best Practices for Building Effective Purpose Communities

**1. Begin Orientation Earlier Through Online Communities.** The majority of withdrawals at universities occur during the first year in higher education (Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange, 1999; Horn and Carroll, 1998), so understanding the first year of a student's experience at college is crucial to solidify his or her educational path.

Students' transitions from high school to college involve intricate psychological and complex sociological processes (McGinnis, 2001); lack of attention to these processes can prove fatal to a college's institutional success. Student orientation and community-building alone are successful (Rode, 2000), but orientation and adjustment interventions for incoming students should begin prior to students setting foot on campus. Leveraging a purpose network is an efficient method to connect incoming students to each other, their advisors, their residence hall and resources on campus necessary to facilitate a positive adjustment to college. Students who are more socially integrated or involved in campus life, and feel they are part of the campus community, are more likely to persist to graduation (Berger & Milem, 1999). In one study of 51 public institutions (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004), the authors found that establishing friendships with peers and intellectual growth experiences were more important than entry demographic characteristics in predicting student success. Astin (1993) and Schlossberg (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989)<sup>5</sup> have also noted the importance of quality student interaction with peers and university staff and faculty as key components to ensure student retention and commitment to the institution. Implementing practices to facilitate transition as soon as possible increases the amount of time institutions have to deliver their message and captures students when they are more likely to engage with communication (i.e., before school starts).

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5 Arthur W. Chickering is an educational researcher in the field of student affairs. He is known for his seminal contributions to student development theories. He published *Education and Identity* in 1969 which explained his seven-vector theory of student development. Dr. Nancy K. Schlossberg is an expert in the areas of adult development, adult transition, career development, adults as learners and intergenerational relationships.

**2. Bring Learning Communities Online.** In their study of 365 universities, Zhao<sup>6</sup> and Kuh (2004) found that participation in a learning community is linked to increased student satisfaction and engagement with the campus community. Student learning communities have typically relied on specific classes or groups of classes by subject theme, residential living areas, at-risk student or other student profile types to bring students together. These groups have consistently provided positive impact when on-ground, but have always been limited in their ability to connect students outside of the classroom and residential area. Many schools, such as the University of South Carolina, Valdosta State University, State University of New York at Oswego and the University of South Florida, maximize their effectiveness and incorporate online resources to increase participation and ease of discussion within and across learning communities.

An effective online networking platform emphasizes the creation of groups, and clearly specifies the purpose of each group in a mission statement. Successful groups include members with common goals and experiences, so they can develop and learn from each other with the help of a guide or group leader. Online learning communities review and discuss common subjects of interest that cut across several courses to answer global questions. Articles and other content should be available online and the platform should provide students the ability to easily comment on and discuss relevant topics. Discussions can take place across several days, weeks or months without the need for a specific allotted time, but may benefit from weekly or bi-weekly devoted online thought and communication.

**3. Enhance Feelings of Student Belonging Through Online Mentoring.** An important factor in implementing an effective online program is the assignment of a mentor. Levitz and Noel<sup>7</sup> (1989) found that first-year students that can name a college-affiliated individual to whom they can turn with a personal problem are more than twice as likely to return to that college for their sophomore year than students who cannot. With that being stated, a one-to-one or one-to-many mentor relationship with someone who is available online with a comprehensive profile, and can communicate directly through means of an online purpose networking messaging component, discussions and/or generally provide academic and social support for the student is critical. In one study of a mandatory e-mentoring program as a retention strategy for female engineering majors, student involvement and overall satisfaction improved with frequency of use (Kasprisin et al., 2003). As more studies are conducted replicating these findings, we anticipate that this will start to be implemented more frequently across college campuses.

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**4. Extend the Reach of Intrusive Academic Advising.** Intrusive academic advising characterizes advising practices that have a strong focus on proactive intervention. Intrusive advisors require student visits when making important educational and career decisions and advisors guide students not only on majors, but career and life decisions with an emphasis on improving decision-making skills. This approach has been shown to be an effective method to improving student retention (Backhus, 1989) by increasing the involvement and motivation of students to stay on the right track toward their academic goals. Research suggests that students respond well to this type of advising, and may become increasingly motivated to complete their work and ask for help if they know someone is looking out for them. With this in mind, online purpose networks allow an expansion of the advisor-advisee relationship by facilitating better communication. They also provide a forum with which to discuss issues with not only one student, but create group discussions around common

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6 Chun-Mei Zhao, alongside George D. Kuh, authored Adding Value: Learning Communities and Student Engagement. Their study examines the relationships between participating in learning communities and student engagement in a range of educationally purposeful activities of first-year and senior students. The findings indicate that participating in a learning community is positively linked to engagement as well as student self-reported outcomes and overall satisfaction with college.

7 Dr. Lee Noel and Dr. Randi Levitz are founders of the Noel-Levitz Centers for Institutional Effectiveness. Drs. Noel and Levitz served as recruitment and retention authorities with ACT's National Center for the Advancement of Educational Practices.

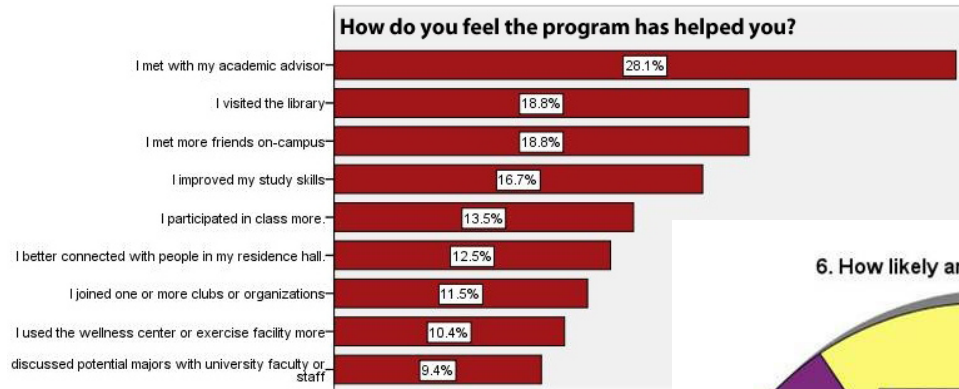
themes and problems that college students face. Discussion groups can be led by a single advisor or a team of advisors, and multiple advisors can connect to their individual students through e-messaging tools and other e-communication mediums.

## Summing Up: A Sample of Our Findings

As we begin to monitor the creation and success of purpose networks nationwide, we are excited and optimistic about their potential. Preliminary results from an EducationDynamics study across 20 schools indicate that students involved in purpose networks were retained to their sophomore year at a 9 percent higher rate than students not involved in the network. Additionally, more than 13 percent of students surveyed reported that the purpose network was “very important” or “extremely important” in their decision to remain enrolled at the university. At one university, first-semester GPAs of students engaged in a purpose network were more than 20 percent higher than students not engaged. Even identifying those students more or less likely to engage in a purpose network provides actionable information on student propensities.

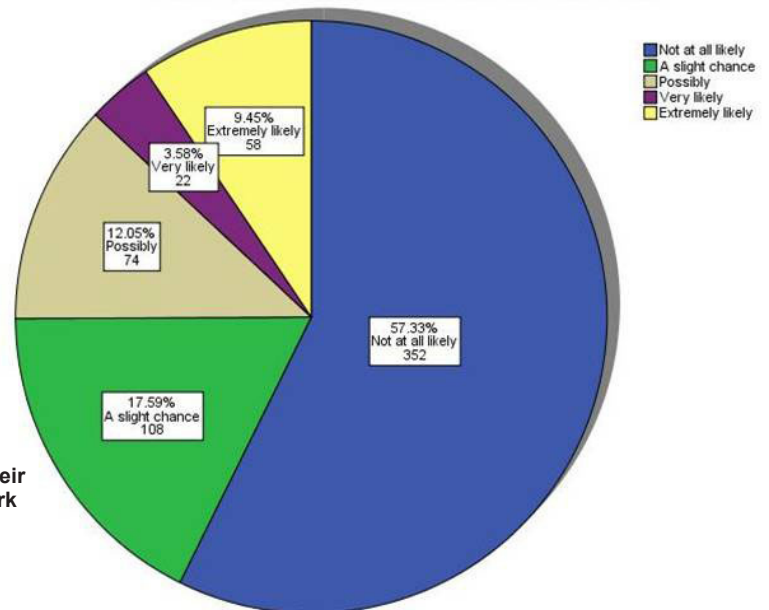
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During these challenging times and amidst a rapidly changing student landscape, we believe that online purpose networks fill a need to connect with a melting pot of student characteristics. Additionally, purpose networks capitalize on an ever-expanding communications platform that students are more pre-disposed to utilizing, with the general population catching up. The four strategies listed above will help guide you toward creating a strong, academically focused purpose network in the pursuit of student persistence and success.



In addition to institutions reporting increased retention across 20 schools using purpose networks, students reported increased use of various student services.

6. How likely are you to transfer from or leave college?



The same survey asked students how likely they were to leave their institution, helping to identify which students the purpose network may have benefited the most.

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