

Student Retention through Attendance Technology

How accurate, organized attendance data assists with:

- accreditation
- early intervention
- student retention
- financial aid compliance



This paper examines:

- Attendance as a predictor of academic performance.
- How attendance gives the earliest indication of dropout risk.
- Attendance as an indicator of student engagement.
- The impact of student engagement on retention.
- How attendance technology supports financial aid compliance.
- How faculty benefit from the automation of attendance tracking and reporting.

Introduction

Student enrollment has been declining for the last three years.^{1,2} Declining enrollment and reduced state funding means that colleges must improve student retention and financial aid stewardship to survive.

Increasingly institutions are focusing on class attendance to ensure that at-risk students continue to successfully persist thus maintaining their financial aid eligibility. Institutions that lack university wide attendance policies and automated systems for supporting such a policy are missing two valuable tools for driving early intervention, academic success, student retention, and financial sustainability. Alerts on student absenteeism enables faculty, counselors, and administrators to engage before students fail or begin giving up.

Further, institutions need organized, reliable attendance data to demonstrate competency during Accreditation Reviews and A-133 Audits that determine an institution's compliance with Title IV requirements related to the awarding and disbursing of federal student financial aid.

Attendance is Correlated Superior Academic Performance

- A Colby study reveals two golden rules of attendance:
 - Colby's Seventy Percent Rule states that students absent 30% or more of the time have a two in three chance of failing the course.
 - The Two-Week Rule finds that any level of non-attendance during the first two weeks of class, for any reason foretells academic trouble.
- The higher number of credits a student attains, the less likely they are to drop out. A University of Illinois analysis revealed that of students who dropped out, "about two-thirds of the students departed with 60 credit hours or less, with the highest proportion having departed with between 16 and 30 cumulative credit hours (i.e., during the freshman year)."³ This underscores the importance of getting students to attend class and perform well academically, so they can earn credits.

Attendance and Retention

The executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, points out that college leaders are enacting campus-wide attendance mandates for the purpose of improving student retention.⁴ Xavier University and University of Arkansas, for example, are seeking to better track attendance for the purpose of improving student retention.

Increasingly, attendance monitoring is being noted as a best practice for student retention efforts:

- › A recent ACT policy report on retention recommends that colleges and universities include attendance records as a part of their early alert strategy.¹⁰
- › A University of Texas study identified attendance as a high impact practice for community college student success, noting that for many schools, developing a campus-wide attendance policy may be the "lowest hanging fruit," a "simple, inexpensive step" to improve academic outcomes and graduation rates.¹¹

Tracking Out of Class Attendance

Wider applications of attendance systems that gather records of student participation in campus services and social events provide meaningful data on student engagement. This further enables colleges and universities to identify dropout risk and get the right personnel involved early. Two examples include:



- Several institutions use a system that tracks how often students attend campus-sponsored parties, student-leadership programs, and how often they check in at the career center. Some universities even incentivize students who qualify for Pell Grants with a rewards system based on participating in activities they track.⁸
- City University of New York (CUNY) developed a degree pathway for students on need-based aid. The pathway includes block scheduling of classes, advising, and **mandatory, full-time attendance**. The program doubled the graduation of students compared to those not in the program.⁹

As more colleges and universities decide to implement campus-wide attendance policies, it will be necessary to implement innovative technology and processes that alleviate the burden on faculty of taking attendance, thus increasing faculty adoption. Both change management and financial cost/benefit need to be taken into consideration with the implementation of any technology.

Attendance Tracking and Federal Financial Aid Compliance

According to National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 85% of full-time students are able to afford post-secondary education because of Federal financial aid.¹⁰ Clearly, it is critical for colleges to protect their institution's ability to participate in Title IV programs.

As of March 2015, the Department of Education disclosed that it is closely monitoring the financial health of 556 postsecondary educational institutions, or about 10% of all institutions receiving federal student aid and grants.¹¹ Of those, most have a status of HCM-1 (heightened cash monitoring), but 69 are subject to more stringent financial restrictions known as HCM-2 status, including 21 under active federal investigation.¹² According to *Inside Higher Ed*, HCM-2 status “means that department employees manually approve every dollar that flows to an institution. Nearly all of those unidentified colleges were on that status because a federal audit of the institution resulted in ‘severe findings’.” Attendance plays a major role in how university leaders are improving their ability to capture and report accurate, compliant attendance records.

- Federal financial aid regulations require that an institution must be able to document attendance in each class for which a student has received Title IV aid.
- If a student drops or adds a class, an institution is required to determine if this has an impact on the student's financial aid package. In the case of the dropping of a class that results in a change in enrollment status— and it impacts eligibility—the institution must adjust the student's aid package and return funds to the Title IV program(s) or report the student's status to NSLDS if the funds have been previously disbursed.
- In the case of both an official and Unofficial Withdrawal, the institution must perform a Return to Title IV calculation (R2T4). Foundational to this calculation is the student's Documented Last Date of Attendance. In the case of an Official Withdrawal, the special c date the student stopped attending all classes is critical to ensure the institution does not return too little or too much to the US Department of Education (the “Department”). In the case of an unofficial withdrawal, if the institution is unable to provide requisite documentation that the student attended at least one day of class for which the student was paid, the student is deemed to never have

established Title IV eligibility and thus all aid must be returned to the Department.

- Finally, there is a date certain that Title IV funds must be returned to the Department. In general, this is no later than 14 days after the withdrawal.

These requirements show why it is wise for university leaders to establish policies for tracking attendance.

Dangers of Not Taking Attendance

If a financial aid award has been disbursed and is owed back to the Department, the institution must return the money promptly and try to collect these monies from the student. Given the student's lower earnings potential without a degree and the fact the student was eligible for financial aid, the likelihood of the institution collecting from the student is minimal.

From a compliance oversight perspective, one example of a potentially-costly Title IV Program Review performed by the Department occurred when auditors sampled student loan accounts at a state university and found 56% "didn't have enrollment status updates reported to the federal government in a timely manner. . . That meant the students got a little extra time before having to repay their debts, but the campus risked federal disallowance for non-compliance, meaning future federally backed loans could have been in jeopardy."¹³

In 2014, the Department cited the late return of program funds were number four in the top ten audit findings. The institution's ability to determine last date of attendance is foundational to the calculation and timely return of program funds.

Once an institution decides to take advantage of the benefits of more in-depth attendance monitoring, the next questions become, "How can we make this easier on our faculty?" and "How do we ensure our faculty maximizes their time teaching and not taking attendance?"The answer can be found in automation.

Automating Attendance Tracking and Reporting

Clearly, tracking attendance can help institutions identify students in danger of underperforming academically as well as help engage and retain students. Keeping careful attendance records also supports the institution's compliance

with Federal Financial Aid requirements for audits and in the event of a Federal Program Review. However, taking attendance manually has proven historically challenging, burdensome, time-consuming, error prone, and frustrating for faculty members and administrators.

Failure to require attendance be taken university wide leads to the following problems:

- Students will attend classes where attendance is taken (particularly if attendance is a component of grading) while skipping classes in which attendance is not taken.
- Faculty members will view attendance as an extra, unnecessary effort because the lack of a definitive policy.
- If the university is subjected to a federal or state audit, administrators not be able to produce accurate records as they will not know which professors actually take attendance and if they do so on a consistent basis.
- If it is unknown which professors take attendance, those records will be difficult to obtain to demonstrate compliance.

The challenges of existing manual attendance processes are well known. Let us instead review the type of technology that supports easy adoption, campus wide deployment, data reliability and federal compliance.

Automated Attendance Systems for Postsecondary Institutions

Many colleges and universities will choose an automated attendance system to make monitoring attendance as easy as possible for faculty and students. Systems should be evaluated based on ease of use and the reliability of data recorded. This will ensure student retention specialists can use this information for predicting at-risk students and the institutions can execute early intervention strategies as well as ensure financial aid administrators have up-to-date information to manage compliance.

For example, an attendance system that communicates with existing campus technology can provide the automation needed to centralize attendance records while also making them easily accessible to faculty members for grading and review purposes. If that system also includes an effortless means for recording student attendance, it can minimize class disruption and save time for faculty by reducing

friction.

Institutions should be cautioned that using student credentials such as ID Cards for this purpose is misguided as it is a small piece of plastic that holds little value to the student. In other words, it is no sacrifice for one student to hand off their ID card to a friend to check them into a course.

Conclusion

Attendance is an important measurement of student engagement. Engaged students in all aspects of campus life are much more likely to persist at college and earn a degree than students who are less engaged. Given 85% of full-time students receive financial aid, attendance-linked persistence minimizes the probability of students leaving without a degree; and in turn, falling into default related to the repayment of financial aid as a result of under-employability and/or a lack of desire to pay for an education they perceive they did not get.

Student recruitment is competitive and costly. Successful student retention permits recruiters to focus on filling the next freshman class as opposed to also refilling next year's sophomore class.

The criteria for the most effective and efficient attendance systems address faculty frustration in taking attendance and data reliability. A good system will provide easy access to data and support early intervention and ultimately retention. Effortless attendance systems are frictionless and can register student presence in class, at school sponsored events and at student support service providers (tutors, counselors, advisors etc.). This attendance data is easily combined with other data streams and incorporated into a bigger picture of campus engagement for administrators focusing on students at-risk, ensuring retention, student success, and institutional financial health.

End Notes

¹ Institute of Education Sciences, "Fast Facts: Enrollment," National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from: <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=98>

² U.S. Census Bureau, "College Enrollment Declines for Second Year in a Row, Census Bureau Reports," September 24, 2014. Retrieved from: <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2014/cb14-177.html>

³ Debra Bragg, Daniel Cullen, Stacy Bennett, and Collin Ruud, "All or Nothing? Midpoint Credentials for Students Who Stop Short of the Baccalaureate Degree," University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, November 15, 2011, pgs. 9-10.

⁴ Douglas Belkin, "Cracking Down on Skipping Class," Wall Street Journal, January 14, 2015. Retrieved from: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/crackingdownonskippingclass1421196743>.

⁵ Noel-Levitz Research – Mid-Year Retention Indicators Report. Retrieved from: https://www.noellevitz.com/documents/shared/Papers_and_Research/2011/2011MIDYEARINDICATORSREPORT.pdf

⁶ Veronica Lotkowski, Steven Robbins, and Richard Noeth, "The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention," ACT Policy Report, 2004. Retrieved from: https://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/college_retention.pdf

⁷ Center for Community College Student Engagement, "A matter of degrees: Practices to pathways (High-impact practices for community college student success)," Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Program in Higher Education Leadership, 2014. Retrieved from: http://www.ccsse.org/docs/Matter_of_Degrees_3.pdf

⁸ Goldie Blumenstyk, "Blowing O Class? We Know," New York Times, December 2, 2014. Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/03/opinion/blowing-o-class-we-know.html?_r=0

⁹ Center for Community College Student Engagement

¹⁰ National Center for Educational Statistics. "Fast Facts" Retrieved from: <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=3t>

¹¹ Aldemaro Romero Jr., "The feds are watching colleges and universities," The Edwardsville Intelligencer, April 20, 2015. Retrieved from: http://www.theintelligencer.com/local_news/article_d3b921d0-e776-11e4-bb66-77515aa0e3f4.html

¹² Michael Stratford, "Cash Monitoring List Unveiled," Inside Higher Ed, March 31, 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/03/31/education-department-names-most-colleges-facing-heightened-scrutiny-federal>

¹³ Andy Koen, "Audit found weaknesses in CSU-Pueblo bookkeeping," KOAA Channel 5 news, May 13, 2005. Retrieved from: <http://www.koaa.com/story/29048025/audit-found-weaknesses-in-csu-pueblo-book-keeping>