

Student Success: Student Retention and Graduation

There are a variety of implications for students who leave college prior to program completion. The economic impact can be immediate when student loans come due and linger for life through lost earning potential (National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 1989). In addition, there are implications to universities including lost revenue from tuition, residential housing and other fees, negative publicity related to retention and graduation rates, and the loss of alumni participation and contributions. Therefore, “student success” is one of the most studied topics in higher education. Although the definition of “student success” varies among institutions, at most comprehensive institutions, including California Lutheran University (CLU), student success means to persist, make continuous progress toward and complete a credential, certificate or degree program. This definition is expanding as most students do not take what was considered the traditional college path and enroll at one institution for their entire undergraduate academic experience. It is estimated that about 60% of all students will attend two or more institutions while attempting to obtain a bachelor’s degree (National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 2011). The National Student Clearinghouse defines persistence as “continued enrollment (or degree completion) at *any* higher education institution – including one different from the institution of initial enrollment...” (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2011, p. 25)

There has been extensive research conducted on first-time freshmen retention. In fact, it is one of the most studied fields in higher education (Tinto, 2005). Mandatory reporting of second-year persistence and graduation rates are required through the National Center for Educational Statistics through Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Therefore, literature and an extensive amount of comparable data on retention and graduation rates for first-time freshman (FTF) across the nation abounds to support practitioners.

There is, however, a substantial lack of research, literature, and comparison data on graduate students and non-traditional undergraduate learners. In recent years, studies have begun to emerge that devote more attention to these student populations and expanded first-time freshmen variables. It has become widely recognized that “one size does not fit all” in student retention and that comprehensive universities should have comprehensive research and analysis plans.

While the NCES and most accrediting bodies require extensive reporting of retention and graduation rates for first-time freshmen, there are no requirements for other undergraduate populations and graduate program learners. Part of the problem is due to the lack of an accepted or widely known definition of student success for student populations other than first-time freshmen. The absence of comparison data and lack of a common definition for part-time freshmen, undergraduate transfer students, credential, and master’s level students hinders the process of institutional goal setting and benchmarking. Most available literature on graduate and adult learners can be found in professional journal articles and conference presentations. However, the majority of the literature on graduate students focuses on those pursuing their doctorates. Other literature on these student populations focuses on barriers that adult students face when pursuing their degrees.

CLU has been working to address student retention and success issues in earnest for at least the last nine years. While the federal government and other entities have asked institutions to report their first to second year retention rate of fall starting first-time freshman, CLU has been tracking student success measures for all our students. CLU is a comprehensive university with traditional undergraduate programs, an adult undergraduate program, master's programs and doctorate programs in Education and Psychology. The last two strategic plans have included student retention goals. The 2008-2012 strategic plan included "recruit and graduate a well prepared and diverse student body that is academically accomplished and reflective of CLU's mission" (CLU Strategic Plan, 2008, p. 1) as one of the seven objectives of the plan. The current strategic plan has five strategic goals and student success is included in goal number two "continue to set high institutional academic standards" (CLU Strategic Plan, 2013).

In the fall of 2007, CLU embarked on an expanded, comprehensive and cohesive approach to student success. One of the first steps in this process was to obtain consensus on an overarching definition of "student success" for all CLU student populations. At CLU, we determine that students are succeeding if they are persisting and making progress toward program completion. For traditional undergraduate students, student success includes continuous enrollment and degree completion. However, for non-traditional undergraduate and graduate students, success is expanded to include continuous enrollment within an academic year.

A second step was to appoint one person on campus to direct student retention and success efforts. CLU created the position of a Director of Retention in the fall of 2007. It was decided the position would be in the division of Academic Affairs under the Associate Provost of Academic Services with the intention that the position was to work more collaboratively and closely with the faculty. In the fall of 2013 the position was retitled to the Senior Director of Student Success to keep current with trends in higher education.

With the addition of a director of student success, CLU has developed a committed team of constituents working to study and improve student success comprehensively. The team is composed of a core group of CLU administrators including the Associate Provost for Academic Services and Registrar, the Senior Director of Student Success, the Institutional Research Officer and the Undergraduate and Adult/Graduate Retention Committees composed of faculty and administrators. Although the team has had access to a tremendous amount of data, a lack of comprehensive information existed. There was little to no data on CLU student populations other than FTF. In addition, the team did not have effective systems in place to relay or report findings to the campus community. As an outcome, myths existed and fed into policy decisions. For example, since CLU's second-year freshmen persistence rates were decent there was an assumption that consecutive year persistence and four-year graduation rates were also in an acceptable range.

The Associate Provost for Academic Services and Registrar expressed the need for comprehensive retention and graduation data as well as the need to communicate knowledge obtained from the analyzed data to constituents beyond the Retention Committee. Higher education institutions are increasingly being pressured by regional and national agencies to be accountable, to assess and prove that their students are learning and succeeding. CLU has always been passionate about student success and

helping students achieve their educational dreams. For this institution, it is just the right thing to do.

This resulted in the CLU Retention Reports, “One Student at a Time” which provides the campus with a tool to meet the campus need for a comprehensive statistical data base for use in expanded retention studies as well as to prepare for the increasing demands for regional and national accountability. It provides timely, accurate data for informed decision making in an easily understood context to promote awareness and a common understanding of the state of retention and student success at CLU. It has been used as a bridge to inform, engage and inculcate responsibility for student success in all members of the campus community. The report has also been used to communicate facts and dispel some of the misconceptions around student retention and success. The analysis is serving as a catalyst to spur data informed action. The report has been analyzed and presented across campus in multiple forums as well as at regional and national conferences.

Traditional Undergraduate

CLU has been proactive regarding first-time freshmen (FTF) undergraduate retention. This attention to undergraduate students has led to a second year retention rate of 85% and a six-year graduation rate of 70% (CLU Fact Book, 2013). First-time freshmen students at CLU are defined as undergraduate students who begin in the fall and have not previously enrolled in a postsecondary degree program. The institution completed a study of the status of first-time freshmen undergraduate retention in 2005. The study addressed a lack of coordination with retention efforts and a lack of in depth analysis of all other students beyond FTF second-year persistence and six-year graduation rates. (Alexander, Kohnke & Pena, 2006).

The director of student success was charged with many initiatives including coordinating the effort to increase the first-time freshman retention rate; creating a campus-wide retention committee and developing a retention plan for the university.

The retention committee began analyzing the retention and graduation rates for the traditional undergraduate population. The calculation of these rates was done using the current accepted standard as indicated earlier in the literature review. A more in depth analysis was begun on the current retention data. As suggested by the literature, CLU looked at specific populations (i.e., 1st generation, low income, athletes, honor students, academic under-preparedness, etc.). Additional data used in the analysis included the average SAT and entering high school GPA scores, student profile data, tuition and fees, undergraduate majors trend data, attrition data, mid-semester academic difficulty notices, low completion course rates and an institutional audit of retention practices across departments on campus.

The retention committee met monthly initially and began reviewing the expanded analysis of the data. The initial analysis of the data culminated in a one-day Retention Summit where the Retention Committee spent the day interpreting and discussing available evidence and drafting an initial retention plan. The ongoing work of the committee is to review the current retention data and give feedback regarding current retention strategies.

The retention plan was presented to the Strategic Planning Steering Committee and was accepted in the fall of 2008. The main goal of the retention plan is to increase the

four-year graduation rate. The university employed many strategies to address the needs of our traditional undergraduate students and increase student success. Some of these strategies included:

- a first year experience self study
- a simple and systematic way to track student enrollment and proactively communicate with students regarding their enrollment
- an intrusive academic assistance program for students on academic probation and/or students conditionally admitted
- a senior year non-completers study
- changes in freshman composition first year placement
- mini-learning communities
- implementation of a financial clearance policy
- changes to continuing student academic scholarship eligibility consideration
- regular reports to the campus community regarding current demographics, enrollment and measures of student retention or success.

“4 to Finish.” There were several factors that led to selecting the goal of increasing the four-year graduation rate. CLU prides itself on delivering a liberal arts education in the context of small class sizes, contact with faculty and the ability to finish in four years. The institution wanted to remove any barriers to students completing their degree in four years. Furthermore, the institution desired to decrease the financial burden to students who do not complete a degree in four years. CLU introduced a four-year graduation guarantee to first-time freshman in the fall of 2009. Our “4 To Finish” Graduation Guarantee Program saw its first participants graduate in 2013. Students must meet program requirements and sign a contract to commit (see appendix x); in return, the University promises that graduation in four years will not be delayed by course availability. If a student follows all program requirements and does not complete in 4 years, CLU pays the student’s tuition after the 4th year.

First Year Self Study. During the academic year of 2008-2009, faculty and staff of the University embarked on an institution-wide analysis of CLU’s current practices relative to nine standards of excellence as articulated by the Foundations of Excellence® in the First College Year process. The Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year (FoE) project originates in the First Year Policy Center in Asheville, N.C. Three recommendations were proposed from this yearlong self-study:

1. To create a coherent first-year experience;
2. To demonstrate CLU’s commitment to the educational experience and success of first year students; and ,
3. To improve communications with students about the first year experience at CLU.

Two changes resulted from this self-study. One change was in regards to how first year students were registered for their courses and the second was to change how first year students were placed into the freshman composition course.

Mini-Learning Communities. CLU is a fairly small institution and yet can still contend with students who find it difficult to engage in the academic community. The institution has implemented many of the recommended high impact strategies for retaining first-year students. For many years it has had a freshman seminar led by

faculty, early alert programs, and other programs specifically designed for at-risk students. CLU did not however have the learning communities that research suggest are a major benefit to student success and wanted to add a learning community quickly but did not have any new resources to support the implementation. The Registrar's Office registers all new freshmen in their first semester schedule. As one of their first year courses, students are enrolled in a freshman seminar led by a faculty member and paired with a Peer Advisor and an Administrative Mentor.

With freshman seminar as the starting point, the institution decided to test the idea of putting groups of three students from each seminar in at least two other core courses together. Mini-learning communities or "stealth cohorts" were created. A simple adjustment to the way freshmen were registered gave the University the opportunity to try a new retention strategy on the entire population all at once, without new resources. Qualitative and quantitative research revealed that "stealth cohorts" improved freshmen connectedness to their peers as demonstrated a rise in our retention rate from 79% for the Fall 2009 cohort to 85% for the Fall 2012 cohort. In the "Retained Student Survey" our returning sophomores reported their relationship with peers as the most important reason for returning their second year. Discriminant analysis between students who were or were not involved in the "stealth cohorts" was conducted on a number of dependent variables. The results showed that experiencing the "stealth cohort" was a significant factor in the improvement of second year retention.

English Placement Test. In the fall of 2012, the English department with the coordination of Student Life, the Center for Student Success, and the Registrar's Office implemented a placement test to more accurately place all first year students in their first year English composition course. The university found in any given year a quarter to a third of our first year cohort needed a remediation course to prepare for freshman composition. Prior to the placement test we did not feel we had the best tools for accurate placement. We are currently conducting formative and summative assessments to determine how the changes in placement are affecting student success.

Retention Software. A retention software package provided the ability to communicate with all university students and track, on an individual basis, progress towards graduation. EMT Retain from Hobsons, Inc. is a Web-based early alert and strategic communication solution that helps institutions make a real impact with student success and retention rates on campus. EMT Retain not only helps institutions pinpoint the students who are most at-risk before attrition, but also provides the tools they need to reach out and engage them" (Hobsons, 2009, para. 2). This communications management tool was the ideal solution for CLU as it allowed for multiple opportunities for student tracking from many different staff and faculty on campus.

STAR Program. An intrusive academic assistance program was created in 2005 to address the needs of two student populations: students placed on academic probation and students conditionally admitted to the university. As stated on the university website (<http://www.callutheran.edu/student-success/support/star-program.php>): Students Taking Academic Responsibility or STAR is a holistic academic assistance program. Developed to enhance academic preparedness of students and provide them with proper direction throughout their academic journey, STAR is designed for probationary and conditionally admitted students as well as those students who choose to elect into the program to receive additional support. Students are asked to sign a contract that requires them to

participate in and adhere to a variety of academic support services. By enrolling in the STAR program, students are taking an active role in furthering their educational success.

Commencement Policy. A retention study conducted on students who persisted to fourth year in 2003-2004 revealed that 8% of students retained to their senior year (students who have earned 90 plus units) were not completing their degree. These findings prompted further study and analyses to determine the causes and address the reasons for non-completion. To encourage degree completion it was determined that the institution would modify its policy on commencement participation. Participation in the commencement ceremony is very important to the majority of our traditional undergraduate population. Some participants in the ceremony were not as close to completion as CLU would like. It took a couple of years to change the campus culture concerning who would be eligible for commencement, but tightening the policies around commencement participation has resulted in a reduction in the rate of seniors who do not complete a degree.

Financial Policies. CLU is also aware that financial considerations are a big factor in determining student success, not only here but at most institutions across the country. To address those factors, the institution has enacted two policies. The first is the implementation of a financial clearance policy for all traditional undergraduate students. Each traditional undergraduate student is required to gain financial clearance on their student account from the Business Office to keep any pre-registered classes for the upcoming semester. In the fall of 2010 the financial clearance policy was created with this goal in mind: By creating a stronger link between enrollment and the student's ability to pay, the university wanted to prevent students taking on unnecessary debt. To accomplish this goal the institution needed to focus on increasing student payment services and options, determining tuition discount earlier and enhancing census data, reducing student receivables and bad debt write-off, and aligning our best practices with comparative universities. The second strategy was to examine our practice of how continuing students were evaluated in financial aid for academic scholarship eligibility. Since the creation of the student retention committee it has been a concern that student success has been adversely affected by the policy in financial aid of academic scholarship eligibility consideration. Financial aid recipients are expected to make reasonable academic progress towards obtaining a degree as a condition to receive federal, state or institutional financial aid. At CLU, the Office of Financial Aid, following the conclusion of the spring semester for Traditional Undergraduate Students, evaluates Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) and Institutional Aid Eligibility (IAE). A student's entire academic history is considered and reviewed yearly, even if the student has not received financial aid in the past, to ensure timely progression toward graduation. This evaluation also included a separate and differentiated analysis of their academic scholarship. For many students this meant a minimum GPA of 3.0 or higher for some. While this might not seem unreasonable, many students who were awarded this scholarship, and their parents, would spend a considerable amount of time worried about GPA requirements to keep their scholarship after their freshmen year when they were also dealing with the stresses of the first year transition. CLU felt this adversely affected student success. Beginning with the 2013-14 academic year, students receiving an institutional Academic Scholarship are only required to maintain SAP and IAE criteria in order to renew their scholarships from year to year.

SSS Program. For over twenty years, CLU has applied and received a grant from the Department of Education to host a TRIO program, Student Support Services (SSS) on campus. The Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) are Federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. SSS is a federally-funded grant program that provides assistance to first-generation and income-qualified students as well as students with disabilities. SSS is federally funded to serve 200 students throughout the academic year. The goal of SSS is to increase the retention and graduation rates of those students who are first-generation, low-income, and/or a student with a disability. The program focuses on promoting academic excellence by providing personalized services to students. SSS assists students in successfully graduating from California Lutheran University, and prepares those who are interested, to enter graduate or professional schools upon completing their Baccalaureate Degree.

T2CLU. While many of our programs are aimed at our full-time first-time freshman cohorts, CLU has also instituted programs to increase the success of our growing transfer student populations. To create an enhanced registration and first-time enrollment experience for our transfer students CLU created T2CLU in the summer of 2011. T2CLU is an inclusive one stop first-time registration day designed to welcome and create personal registration experience for each individual new transfer student. The Center for Student Success, the Registrar's Office, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and Undergraduate Admissions worked collaboratively to gather transfer students in four registration days per year. Goals of this event included an opportunity to introduce students to the academic culture of the institution and to jump start engagement with the faculty. The institution knew that many students from community college struggled in the first semester with the transition to a four year institution. This registration event offers the opportunity for new transfer students to meet individually with a faculty member to register for the first semester of courses and to create a graduation plan. The students and their families also get a chance to meet each other and attend an open house of other vital offices on campus to gather resources, including Career Services, Residential Life, Student Life and Orientation Programs, Student Support Services, Business Office, Financial Aid, Multicultural and International Student Programs, and Study Abroad. In addition the T2CLU program, the institution has also added Peer and Faculty Mentors for new transfer students as part of new student orientation.

Student Affairs Events. Many initiatives to increase student success occur outside the classroom and are addressed by student affairs departments on campus. Our Student Leadership and Programs puts on commuter events once a month during the academic year. The First Year Retreat Program is a 24 hour getaway from campus for an opportunity for first year students to reflect on their time at CLU so far, bond with other students, and discover the involvement opportunities that are open to them. First year Peer Advisors select students whom they believe will benefit from this retreat. The Student Life Office also looks to Student Support Services and faculty advisors to invite students to attend.

CLU has disaggregated student success data in many different ways. We have looked particularly at our on campus housing population and how they do in comparison to students who commute to campus to complete their degree. The original study into

retention and graduation rates for residential students showed initially that contrary to accepted thought, overall residential students at CLU do not retain and graduate at higher rates. In 2009 the five-year average of the six-year graduation rate for on-campus residential students was 64% and commuters was 67%. Average for all students was 64%. In 2011 the five-year average of the six-year graduation rate for on-campus residential students was 63% and commuters was 65%. Average for all students was 63%. This original study, and subsequent reporting of data, prompted many on campus to request further analyses into the impact of the CLU Residential Housing Program.

During the summer of 2011 an expanded analysis was conducted and a new research question was asked. What effect does housing have on student success? A new methodology was initiated utilizing proportion and regression. Additional variables included: entering academic preparedness, college achievement, Pell grant recipient, type and time in housing, gender, underrepresented ethnic group, varsity athlete and grades in remedial English and math. These results showed a much different picture where “time in campus housing” became the predictive variable to student success. An analysis of the fall cohorts entering between 2000 and 2005 (n=1288) showed that on average students who lived on campus for seven or eight semesters graduated at 55% in four years and those that only lived at home graduated at 10% in four years. The results from the new study show that more work is always needed to close the loop in research and that continuous improvement is needed, as we are always interested in further investigation and improvement.

Graduate and Adult Programs

Multiple attempts have been made to obtain comparison data for our graduate students. Faculty and staff at the institution have searched the literature on a continual basis to find comparison data from other institutions only to come up empty every time. The Senior Director of Student Success, Associate Provost of Academic Services and the Institutional Research Officer have been presenting CLU’s master degree seeking student success data at professional conferences since 2006. Presentations at the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE), California Association of Institutional Research Officers, (CAIR), the Association of Institutional Research Officers (AIR), Western Association of Schools and College Academic Resource Conference (WASC ARC) have all been made with the explicit goal of obtaining comparison data. To date the attempts have been unsuccessful in obtaining consistent, longitudinal and comparable data for our graduate programs.

Working on retention with adult and graduate degree level programs presents challenges. As stated, there is little published research or evidence as to why they do or do not persist making it difficult to find consensus in defining ‘student success.’ In addition, there are no mandatory reporting or compliance requirements related to graduate and adult learner persistence and completion. The lack of comparison data hinders the process of establishing data driven goals and external benchmarks.

Beginning in Spring 2004, a concerted effort has been made at CLU to provide the graduate and adult student learner programs the same level of emphasis that was being placed on the traditional undergraduate programs. Before 2004, there was not a systematic graduate and adult student learner reporting system in place at CLU. Requests

for data and reports were being generated mostly in an ad hoc manner for the purpose of accreditation, enrollment management, marketing, program reviews, course scheduling, new program development, grant writing, faculty hiring and/or curiosity.

The first regular reporting templates related to retention and graduation completion included trends on second year persistence and time to degree. Most of these original reports provided data on the fall-to-fall student cohorts familiar in traditional undergraduate reporting style.

As each new report was created, the institutional research officer would request feedback from the dean or program director who had requested the data and then from other deans and program directors, the Director of Graduate and Adult Marketing, and other pertinent faculty and staff. The institutional researcher would specifically ask about how the data was being used, or could be used, the usefulness in decision making value, and for any data driven outcomes. The collaboration led to cross-functional ownership of the reporting development process, helped insure buy-in regarding the data included in the report and resulted in the establishment of university wide templates.

A definition of retention that can be used across all programs (i.e., semester, four terms a year, five terms a year) also developed over time with program wide collaboration. In the 2005-2006 academic year, as part of a master's thesis project on campus, a CLU employee researched the enrollment trends of graduate level students. The employee analyzed the patterns of graduate students over a seven year period and determined who was still attending or had completed their credential or degree program. These data were shared campus wide, which spurred requests for expanded, streamlined, routine analysis and reporting.

A streamlined reporting style evolved into the current CLU model. New students are grouped into academic year cohorts consisting of all new students starting a program in any term within an academic year (summer terms through spring terms). These cohorts are then tracked to see who persists or graduates in any term within the following academic year and subsequent years.

The institutional research officer has been able to provide consistent, program specific, systematic reporting utilizing these criteria, since obtaining program wide consensus. Frozen census files were used to cohort students according to their entry term thereby allowing the opportunity to provide trend data by program. This baseline data is being utilized in program specific data driven decision-making.

Simultaneously with the approval of the undergraduate retention plan and consensus regarding graduate and adult learner data, meetings were held to gather the program directors and faculty of each program. A Graduate and Adult Student Learner Retention Task Force was formed in 2008. Data was presented by program and the members of the committee were asked the same question that had plagued the institutional researcher and retention director: "Where was the comparative data from other institutions?" The committee completed more research of the literature with the same outcome. While the traditional undergraduate students and doctoral students were heavily studied in regards to retention no such body of research existed for graduate and adult learners. Non-traditional students will soon constitute more than 60 percent of higher education's potential customer base (Hadfield, 2003). As a consequence of the finding, in combination with the diverse population and the needs of the students, more

research is needed on this population to meet the goals of producing a college-educated society to keep up with global competition.

Committee discussions regarding student support revealed a need for a more program specific approach. Analysis is being completed on areas such as: delivery methods (i.e., online, blended, on campus), cohort versus non cohort models, program size, residential experiences, academic and student life support, attitudes of the faculty, and students in each program. Preliminary results of this analysis are consistent with undergraduate trends. Students who start in a cohort, take classes on campus, and/or live on campus retain and complete at the highest rates. Retention of online learners is the lowest of any group on campus. Analysis has also moved beyond year to year to term to term being placed on 'stop-out/leave of absence' patterns.

As a continuing part of the analysis, the Director of Retention completed an institutional inventory of current retention strategies each program employs to work with its students. The compilation provided a basis for an overall graduate and adult degree program retention analysis. Many new strategies have emanated from that retention practices inventory and the data collection efforts. CLU has expanded many of the programs offered to traditional undergraduate students to increase the success of the adult and graduate student populations. Some of these expanded programs include:

- the STAR program
- a retention specialist for our adult degree, or Professionals, program
- a Graduate and Adult Student Council
- a Weekly newsletter from Student Life with issues that just pertain to that student population
- student tutoring
- a payment plan for their student account balances that more adequately address their needs.

In 2014 California Lutheran University merged with the Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (PLTS) in Berkley, CA. Prior to Fall 2011, student retention was not tracked at PLTS and currently retention is measured through antiquated spreadsheet approaches. CLU will be folding in PLTS to our current methodology and student success tracking and has already started testing preliminary reporting.

As the university continues to put focus on retention and student success it has become clear that while the students of each population are unique with their own specific needs, there still exists one common dominator. This common dominator is what CLU has adopted as the retention and student success motto of "One Student at a Time". The "One Student at a Time" motto embodies the flexibility necessary to address each student population individually in a meaningful manner. It also gives CLU the ability to create a retention and student success funnel that allows us to respond to retention issues on a macro and micro level.