

Twelve Best Practices for Student Engagement and Retention

In campus discussions many faculty asked about specific steps they might take to support Mansfield's retention efforts. Here are some suggestions that are drawn from our more comprehensive [Retention Action Plan](#), which is available online.

1. Many students come to college adrift and with no history of appropriate academic expectations ever being placed on them. They lack study skills or the capacity to plan their daily and weekly routines. First year students particularly need structure in their college lives. Once new students get even a week behind, they become at risk for giving up and dropping out. *Recommendation: Implement a mandatory class attendance policy for all first year and other lower level courses. Report students who miss more than two classes in succession so that a retention team member can contact them for follow-up.*
2. Evidence has consistently indicated the importance of new students connecting with their advisor(s) very early in their first semester of college. *Recommendation: All advisors should meet individually or in small groups with first year students within two weeks of the start of the semester. Sooner is better!*
3. Some faculty may unintentionally encourage the notion that class attendance is not essential. (In fact, it is not essential if one only covers material that is in a text book.) Tinto (2011) and others advise making full use of the first day of class to engage students with the syllabus and the course material and other students in the class who should become partners in learning. Discussing pathways to success in the course is important in a first class session. Using an assessment of knowledge and course expectations can be an important part of the first class session. Handing out a syllabus and sending students on their way during the first class session is identified by Tinto and others as a practice to be avoided. *Recommendation: Make effective use the first class sessions to build a culture for learning in the course.*
4. Students linked closely with others in engaging and productive campus activities, whether the Honors Program, the band or chorus, an athletic mentoring program, the TRiO program, a particular club, or some other activity at the department level persist in college at higher rates. *Recommendation: Encourage your students to become engaged in not only your classes but in a campus activity or program they find meaningful.*
5. Persistence of second and third year students is a matter of growing concern. *Recommendation: All advisors should meet individually or in small groups with returning second and third year students within the first month of the start of the fall semester to complete an academic "checkup" that ensures students are on track for achieving their educational, professional, and graduation goals.*
6. Students with clear academic, personal, and career goals persist at higher rates. Students who lack such goals should be engaged through advising, career planning courses (e.g., AHD 1101, Introduction to Career Development), or other means, to define a direction for themselves as soon as they enter college. *Recommendation: Include goal-setting and career-planning guidance in your*

student advising sessions. Maintain a record of goals and career plans for each student. This process should also be considered in First Year Seminar courses.

7. Actively engage all students who are in first-year courses and seminars. They should experience class as productive time that helps them understand course content and think productively about the topics being covered. *Recommendation: Active learning through problem focused discussions, group work, writing assignments, clicker technology, and so on, should be a part of classes that fully engage students in learning. Learn about [flipping your class](#) if you don't already know what that means.*
8. Writing, even briefly, within class can be a productive activity. It can be accomplished in any size class. For example a [one-minute paper](#) can be engaging and useful to both instructor and student. This kind of assignment can be a part of any class, and the instructor needs only to read a sample of the papers and respond at the opening of the following class to make the process meaningful. *Recommendation: Use techniques such as the one-minute paper to improve class engagement, learning, and communication between instructors and students. First Year Seminar faculty should consider weekly journals or similar assignments on specific topics or campus activities attended and allow class time for student reflection on campus life.*
9. The timing and frequency of exams and quizzes in first year courses is critical. Best practice would be to have an assessment of some kind or quiz by the second or, at the latest, the third class. The maxim "test early, test often" is particularly important for first year courses. The outdated college practice of a mid-term and a final is lethal for underprepared first-year students. Spaced learning and demonstration of learning promote better retention of material. *Recommendation: First year courses should follow the practices of assessing early and often and avoiding a small number of major examinations as the primary method of assessment. Low-risk or practice exams should be used to help students adapt to the expectations of college-level learning.*
10. Students who come to class prepared are more likely to be engaged in meaningful learning. Assignments can be designed so that students are required to be prepared for class. Generally, points assigned to preparation or pre-class quizzing online help to ensure that students are better prepared. *Recommendation: Design courses so that students are prepared for discussions or other classroom activities before they arrive.*
11. Supplemental instruction or course-centered study groups that meet outside of class improve learning outcomes and student persistence. *Recommendation: Build supplemental instruction, peer leader support, or student study group assignments into your courses. Points assigned to such activities increase participation.*
12. As a university we need to ensure a better understanding of the needs of our students that will promote their persistence and academic success. MAP-Works is the instrument that Mansfield has adopted for this purpose. We have a goal of obtaining a 100% response rate for new students taking MAP-Works. *Recommendation: If you have any first-year students in your courses or among your advisees, help us ensure they take MAP-Works when it becomes available online each September.*

The suggestions above are all drawn from known best practices in improving student persistence and success. We can be more effective as a University if we implement them collaboratively.