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Retention and Beyond
Building stronger relationships through high-touch communications

Gina Miller, Vice President, Director of Customer Experience

What You'll Learn
- Efficient program planning tips
- How to prioritize
- Execution best practices

Dear Executive,

Over the years, we've been privileged to help several higher education institutions overcome some thorny issues. Chief among them is student retention.

At one institution, students were leaving at an unusually high rate, and student satisfaction was down. Plus, Student Services personnel were fielding a high volume of routine questions from students. This took their time and attention away from helping with more complex needs. As a result, staff morale and job satisfaction was suffering, and the administration was starting to note a rise in personnel churn.

Our forward-looking client wanted help developing a retention communications program that could improve the quality and consistency of service, and eliminate time spent on nonproductive, unrewarding, and repetitive tasks.

At the time, it was a highly cutting-edge idea. After working to understand the underlying issues, we helped our client develop a proactive, high-touch approach to retention with personalized, automated communications. The result was indeed a marked improvement in retention rates … what's more, it streamlined operations to enable thousands of Student Services hours to be redirected from maintenance to growth initiatives.

This success led to a tectonic shift. Soon departments across the organization clamored for their needs to be addressed too. It seemed everyone started to embrace the idea that marketing was the "Center of Advanced Communications"… the heart of constituent relationship management.

Since then we've addressed the needs of student micro-segments, as well as parents, alumni, donors, faculty, staff, high school counselors … and beyond. We're giving you a glimpse into our process of discovery, strategic development, and execution, and hope that you'll find a nugget or two to help in your own efforts to build positive, productive, and lasting relationships with students and other constituent groups.

Enjoy,

Gina M. Miller
Vice President, Director of Customer Experience

Retention and Beyond

Building Stronger Relationships through High-Touch Communications.

If you want to be a real hero this year, become a champion for student retention at your institution.

Current statistics indicate that only about 45 percent of all students who enroll in postsecondary education will ultimately earn a bachelor's degree. Plus, a very high percentage of students will transfer after their first year or so. Attrition is a high-stakes business challenge for every institution.

A big part of the retention solution lies in building stronger relationships, and at the core of solid relationships is better communication.

With or without a CRM system, you can formulate and execute a retention communications plan that can deliver critical information as well as value-added tools and inspiration to at-risk students. What's more, you can ensure these communications are deployed automatically based on segment or behavior.

CBD has perfected a planning approach that any higher educator can apply, and a series of best practices to guide efficient execution of a retention communication program that can:

- Ensure consistent experiences
- Anticipate specific needs
- Optimize staff time, resources, and perceived value
- Prove effectiveness and return on investment

Numerous studies have been conducted about the reasons for attrition, exploring situational barriers like financial status or time conflicts, demographic and psychographic variables, distance learning vs. traditional classroom format, etc. It seems that for the past two decades, researchers have tried to identify 1) whom schools shouldn't recruit and 2) how course delivery impacts program completion. Still, the retention issue is light years from being solved. Schools are recognizing that they need to take a holistic view, and put programs in place that directly address the needs of unique groups of students. Improving the student experience is the new mantra.

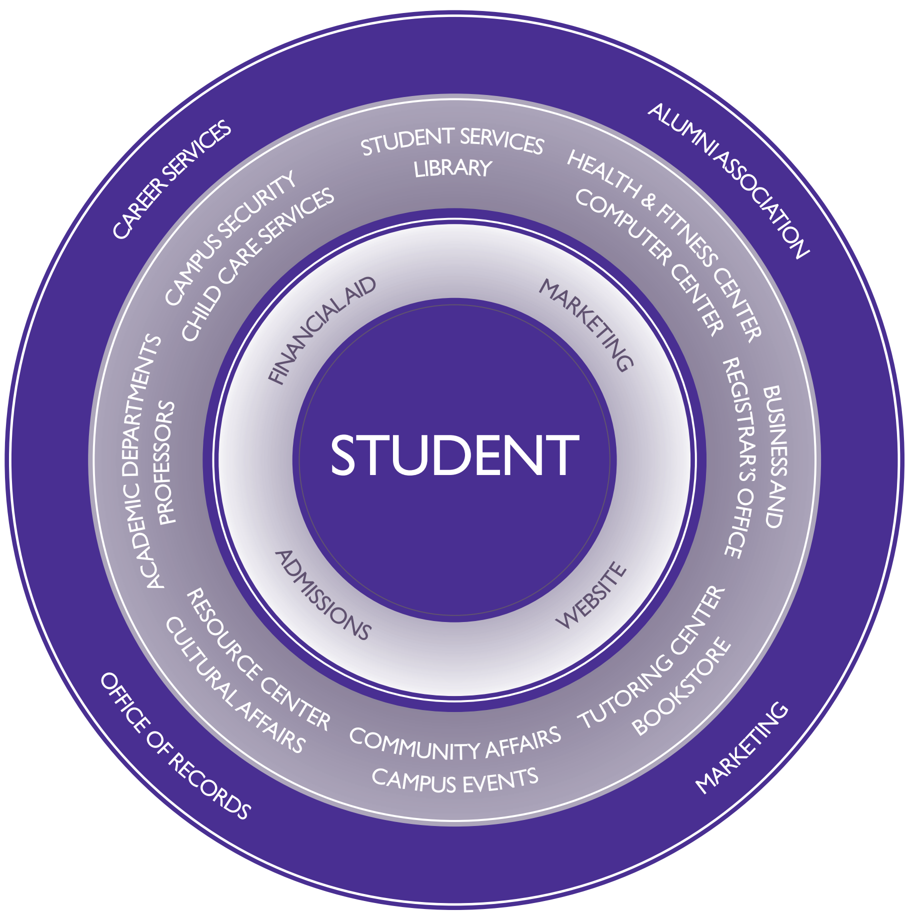
Through the **student's eyes.**

When you objectively look at your institution through the filters of a new student's perspective, you will see enormous opportunities to better engage students and enhance their experience by anticipating their communication, information, and resource needs.

Most schools put their best feet forward through the recruitment process. Later, a student will have thousands of needs to be met by dozens of departments. The student experience is the sum of traditionally autonomous, fragmented parts. They're on a long four-year path…a path that is in itself only a step toward an amorphous future. It's all too easy for students to have the impression that no one would miss them if they didn't return next semester or transferred elsewhere.

Leaving an institution is rarely a simple matter for students; there are innumerable cognitive, social, and institutional factors behind the behavior. Many (but not all) of these factors can be boiled down to a simple truth: nonreturning students are not connected enough to the value they are receiving to overcome obstacles or apathy.

Students have a better chance of staying motivated when they receive guidance and stewardship, understand the steps to success and feel they are valued members of the school community. These are things you can definitely provide and reinforce through relevant communication.

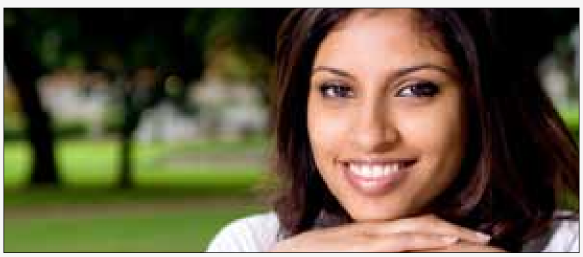


The student experience is the sum of a broad array of disparate interactions.

The #1 Quality of **a Retention Hero.**

Empathy is one of the most important tools of the Retention Hero. With empathy, you can establish better outreach and demonstrate partnership with your students to empower their success. Sometimes it's hard to remember how difficult it really is to persist in your education as a young adult. It may be useful to reflect back to your own first year of college, and remember your thoughts, feelings and impressions. And ask students and alumni to tell you how they've really felt.

We regularly speak with students, and listen closely for both rational and emotional obstacles that potentially lie between a student and their degree.



Vivica said: *I commute 45 minutes to campus every morning. Most of my classes I feel like I "have to take," only one relates to what I want to do. So it's expensive and not very rewarding. I really like two of my professors, but I dread any time I have to do business with this school … it's impersonal and it seems nothing gets done without several forms, and their hours of business are really limited. For work-study, I shelve books at the main library and work in the financial aid office processing applications, but I also have a "real job" plus a full course load. I don't really have any on-campus social life. I feel like I'm going to this school—not that it is "my school."*

Andrew said: *I live on campus, but my parents live half an hour away. I still see all my old high school friends, and spend more time with them than anybody from college. I think I want to be a computer engineer, but I'm having a really hard time with a math course. I tried a study group, but it fell apart after a couple of weeks. Plus my professor doesn't seem very interested in helping me. I can't afford a car, so sometimes my mom and dad pick me up and I go home for the weekend. The food here is just terrible, and the dorm is too loud.*

Solicit a broad cross-section of student perspectives regularly, and you'll never run out of the insights you need to improve the student experience.

The process **of discovery.**

Ongoing research is a key component of retention success. At regular intervals, schools need to look for systemic contributors to attrition, as well as the characteristics of nonreturning students. You will also know better how to effect higher retention by getting a 360° view of both returning and lapsed students' experiences.

An email survey to lapsed students is insufficient to identify mitigation measures; what you will likely learn from a survey is what you would expect to learn. Lapsed students will use standard excuses—no time, no money, health or family issues, just needed a break, etc. But you need to know what would have made a difference. This requires probing and relating.

To be efficient in your discovery, try the following:

1. Map the departments, programs, people, processes, and actions currently on the retention front lines.
2. Conduct segmentation analysis to see if there are any obvious trends among identifiable populations; older students, part-time students, minority students, and working adults tend to have higher dropout rates. Don't forget to account for transferring students in your analysis.
3. Identify study groups based on the three segments most significant to your institution.
4. Conduct in-depth interviews with former students. Consider including their parents, their advisors, and their instructors.
5. Characterize common pain points, and articulate specific issues and needs.
6. Assess these findings against groups of returning students within the same segments.

Planning for **intervention.**

After your journey of discovery, you should have a pretty good idea where you've got the most opportunity to improve retention. It's time to map a course of action. We've compiled some of our process best practices and other considerations that may be useful to you.

- **Focus first on high-risk student segments and behaviors**
  You must crawl before you can run, so take on the low-hanging fruit first. Start broad and general, and get more sophisticated and targeted as you go.
  - Some schools consider all first-year students to be at a high dropout risk (it has certainly been our experience that students who are almost at the halfway point of their four-year program will likely persist), and there is a growing awareness that males, in general, need special support to increase their chance of success.
  - Students that do not pay bills, register late, and have performance and attendance issues are in need of some extra care. Look for other common behaviors that signal intervention is needed.
- **Form a cross-functional, cross-departmental team to review findings and participate in planning**
  Departments and services are usually competing for share-of-student. Sometimes you need to foster a collective responsibility for the relationship, rather than encourage jurisdictional boundaries. For this reason we advocate that you enlist top administrators, and that they be demonstrative in their support of your efforts.
- **Craft a strategy that is aligned with your business objectives and set success metrics**
  For example, like many other schools, you may find that you're losing young mothers due to child care issues. Keeping just a quarter of these students would be a big win, right? What solutions can you offer, how can you engage them, and what reinforcement do you think you need to provide?

  When developing your strategy, also take a look at relevant operational issues. Here are a couple of thought-starters:
  - Is staff spending a significant portion of time with repetitive communications?
  - What cyclical, administrative communications can be centralized?
  - What processes get in the way of relationships?
  - Are students self-helping with available online resources?

- **Map existing communication touchpoints, and fill the gaps**
  Keep in mind that too many communications are just as bad as too few. You'll want to make sure you're distributing both critical and value-added communications with appropriate frequency. It's important to note that communication is a two-way street, so include feedback and engagement mechanisms.

  If you can, it's a good idea to map what communications are already being delivered to students, and seek ways to optimize each touchpoint to avoid overwhelming students. Admissions, financial aid, marketing, academic departments, clubs and student services should all weigh in on their communication needs and plans.

- **Take an integrated approach**
  Electronic forms of communication (websites, microsites, email, social media, etc.) are easy to measure, but cannot be the only communication channels. The "millennial" generation expects interactions with you to be relevant and real-time, so electronically automate what you can. However, students are observant of offline impressions as well. Posters and flyers, video, campus radio, mail, text messages, phone calls, intercept surveys, promotions and contests … the more varied the delivery of the message, the more acculturated the message becomes.

- **Synchronize and support**
  It may be beneficial to form task force teams around each significant issue or target segment in order to regularly assess progress and identify areas of improvement. It's best if this task force becomes "the face of the solution" …that they actively interface with students about the issue. Internal awareness is also vital. Foster sensitivity to the issues, promote strategies, and spotlight the go-to people.

- **Execute and measure**
  Regularly tracking engagement metrics will help you fine-tune your efforts, and demonstrate a causal relationship to retention rates. Don't forget to also measure operational efficiencies. Repurposed hours are like gold for resource-scarce institutions.

Assessing impact to address **specific behaviors.**

One of the most challenging aspects of starting a retention communications program is to avoid spreading yourself too thin. It's useful to focus your efforts around business drivers. Pinpoint the situations that are most disruptive to the relationship … situations for which supplemental resources and communication can make a difference.

To prioritize, you need to know what impact a situation is having on your business, and think it through to ensure that you're applying the most relationship-building action to drive a more positive business result.

One tool that we've used to assess impact forces us to think through the business and relationship impact of a situation, as well as the potential actions that can be taken.

In this example, we look at what we should do when students are procrastinating during registration.

Situation:	• Too many students register in the last 10 days of the registration period
Projected total rate of occurance:	• Range of 42% - 44% over last two semesters
Primary business impact:	• Student attrition observed too late to correct for current session
Secondary business impact:	• Resource uncertainty • Staff work load consistency
Primary experience impact:	• Under time pressure, staff acting as "clerk" instead of advisor/advocate
Secondary experience impact:	• Inability to proactively intervene/advise is lost opportunity
Potential causes:	• Institutional passivity, lack of call to action • Registration perceived as difficult, time consuming, costly
Current mitigation measures:	• Flex and temp resources added to support last-minute workload
Projected cost implications:	• Temp employees, redirected flex resources; ~>$10,000 annual
Potential solutions:	• A) Target previous last-minute registerers with reminder • B) Promote early registration to all students with incentive • C) Increase fees for late registration
Recommendation:	• Test Option B first

Tools like this can help you gauge the relative importance of a touch-point, and align it within the greater communications plan.

A personal touch drives **higher engagement and results.**

Driving toward more personal relevance should be an evolutionary goal of a retention communications effort. There's no end to the possibilities:

- Remind students of key deadlines, start dates, books, changes in service hours, personnel, etc.
- Work with academic deans to develop communications designed to reinforce the value of completing a course or program.
- Develop a success-building series for parents that can keep "persistence = payoff" front-of-mind.
- Provide composition and citation tips.
- Draw individuals to opportunities and events related to their specific interests.
- Recognize achievements.

CRM coming of age on campus.

As stated before, you can implement a retention communication program with or without a CRM system. If your school is ready to harness their ERP and CRM systems to address retention, you are truly ahead of the field. A CRM system can add an exciting level of personal relevance, immediacy, and sophistication to any communications program.

Almost half of US colleges and universities employ a CRM system, although most are utilizing it primarily for marketing and admissions. The most prevalent applications include automating processes for generating letters, calls and emails; tracking marketing campaigns; collecting inquiry data; and tracking admissions status information. CRM applications are just beginning to expand across the student life cycle to include retention.

CRM in higher education will mature because all types of constituents will demand it. It's not just students who have higher expectations than ever for transparency, immediacy, accessibility and relevancy in their relationships. And that's what CRM is designed for.

Schools that are driving innovation in this area are those that have committed champions. These champions may not know anything about the technology. What they have in common is a vision of a more "student-centric," contemporary, competitive and caring school.

A student saved is **a student earned.**

We started this paper out by saying this is your big chance to be a hero this year, and we don't want to undersell the opportunity. Positively impacting retention has broad-reaching benefits

Here are our top four reasons to be passionate about reducing attrition:

Your school wins: if 25% of the students fail to return next year, 25% of every dollar you spent for recruitment was wasted. (Obviously, there are many, many other ways your school wins, as well.)

Your community wins: every student plays a vital role in your local economy, with the purchase of goods and services on and off-campus.

Every taxpayer wins: every student is in some way subsidized by public funding.

Society wins: a wide variety of potential future societal issues—from crime to healthcare—are reduced with each new college graduate.

Evolving for Millennials…**Preparing for Generation Z.**

Gen Y—the Millennials born between the late 1970s and the late 1980s—have done more to challenge the traditional academic model than any generation before. Educators have had to soul-search in unfamiliar territory to engage with these students, to try to stay in front of them. Their expectations for instant personal service, diversified and customized offerings, and sophisticated interactive technologies have spawned profoundly innovative delivery models and new niches in the higher education marketplace.

They are driving seamless online/offline course-delivery convergence. They demand that professors embrace 24/7 availability and text messaging. They're blowing the lid off of proprietary curriculum by insisting on accessibility. They need educational games and simulations. They want to be met more than halfway.

Institutions will compete for a sharply dwindling group of Millennials through 2012, and the last will graduate college in 2017. But before you breathe a sigh of relief…we suspect that Generation Z is going to be equally challenging.

Not a great deal of researched data with nuanced insight is available for Gen Z yet, but the buzz is building. Born after 1995, Gen Z is just starting to enter high school.

(continued)

CBD is ready to make some speculations based on what we've read and observed. We think Gen Z will be smart and independent… the product of information and technology saturation and a more hands-off parenting style. They will be able to process and assimilate more information more quickly, and will want a self-paced educational experience. They may not be as collaborative as Gen Y, nor have the same disregard for their privacy and personal space. They may need a lot more interpersonal and soft skills training…they are not accomplished verbal or written communicators.

Generation Z will perhaps blur the distinction between professor and student. Gen Y professors may have a difficult time relating to this self-directed, brilliant, but socially stunted generation.

In our new value-driven economy, Gen Z may be prone to being risk-averse, critical, conscious and decisive consumers. Technology will continue to redefine mobility and distance will mean nothing to them, but time and price will. They will go around obstacles.

We must also probably anticipate that a significant segment of Gen Z will be more responsible for and involved with the well-being of their parents and grandparents. According to a 2005 US Census Bureau survey, over six million children are being raised by their grandparents. Considering the potentially irrevocable loss of wealth for Boomers and Gen X during the last recession, Gen Z may be more likely to stay at home and commute or virtually attend college. It's possible that a larger proportion of students will start in community colleges, and take longer to complete their programs.

It will be a while before we know if our predictions are on track…the one thing we're absolutely certain of is that it will be an exciting era of continuing evolution in higher education.

For more insight into Gen Y and Gen Z, we recommend *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* by Neil Howe and William Strauss market what's meaningful®

About CBD Marketing

CBD is a B2C and B2B marketing services agency that clarifies and articulates what's most meaningful about your brand, product or service and helps you build more intimate and profitable relationships with your customers.

At the heart of everything we do is a deep understanding of the rational and emotional drivers that inspire your customers' choices. At CBD, "market what's meaningful" is our mission, guiding all disciplines from brand development to media strategy, from public relations to creative..

Let's Talk!

To talk about how CBD can help you create moments that matter to your audience and better connect them to your brand, product or service, please contact Doug Davila, Director of Business Development at 312.661.1050 or ddavila@cbdmarketing.com.

About the Author

Gina Miller, Vice President, Director of Customer Experience
Fifteen years ago, while pursuing a career in business and operations management, Gina Miller took the reins of a database marketing firm—a role that would change her life. Out of this experience grew a passion for results-focused marketing and analytics.

Now a senior integrated marketing generalist, Gina serves as CBD's VP, Director of Customer Experience. In this capacity, she spearheads consumer, customer and employee research initiatives and strategic marketing planning and execution for both business-to-business and business-to-consumer clients.