If You Ask Them, They Will Come Back!!

A Different Kind of Retention: Recapturing Former Seniors

AACRAO Annual Meeting
New Orleans 2010

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UNC Charlotte

- 24,700 total students; 19,400 undergraduates
- 3,190 freshmen; 2,300 transfers
- 90 bachelor’s degrees; 62 master’s and 18 doctoral programs
- Over 3,550 students are over the age of 25 and pursuing a first baccalaureate degree
- Located in Charlotte, NC – a population of approximately 700,000
What student categories does your institution focus on when it comes to meeting enrollment and retention goals?

- Freshmen
- Transfers
- Graduate students
- Continuing students
- Nontraditional students
- International students
What about those seniors who just “walk away” without a degree?

- In 1996, the University of New Mexico conceived The Graduation Project—“a systematic effort to identify, recruit and support students who left the university after doing the majority of the work needed to complete a degree.”

- UNM identified 3,855 students who had stopped out over the prior 10 years after earning at least 98 credit hours and had a 2.98 G.P.A.

- Since the program’s inception, more than 2,000 students have returned and over 1,000 have completed their bachelor’s degree.
In 2004, the University of Wisconsin System projected there were more than 15,000 students in good academic standing who had achieved senior status but left without completing their baccalaureate degree.

UW–Oshkosh established the “Graduation Project” similar to UNM and found that 1,500 seniors in good standing left in the preceding 10 years. They started with 100 students who left between 1999 and 2003.

UW System President Reilly said the campus–based projects could add as many as 4,000 UW System graduates to the state’s workforce in just five years!
In 2008, the state of Kentucky identified 11,000 adult learners who came within a course or two of earning a college degree but never did.

All eight of the state’s public universities are part of the “Project Graduate” to bring students back to finish what they started.
Goals for such programs:

- Persuade adults with three+ years of college credit to come back;
- Make the admissions process a smooth and friendly one;
- Provide detailed academic advising;
- Help them navigate academic regulations; and,
- If possible, offer financial assistance!
This is a perfect group to recruit back to your campus!

- They have already invested a major portion of their education with your campus!
- They are older and wiser now!
- They know the value of time and money.
- A degree can improve their earning power and contribute more to their community and the state.
- They are impressed when you reach out to them and provide personal attention. Such a program generates tremendous good will.
At UNC Charlotte...we found

- We had lost 2,464 seniors over seven years who left the university with a 2.0 G.P.A. or higher and did not complete their degrees.

- The average G.P.A. of these students is 2.74, so academic performance was not the issue.
49er Finish Program—why?

- We are concerned by retention and graduation rates and this was a group we had not really considered.

- The student and our campus have already invested a considerable amount of time and money in their education— they are already academically successful. It’s a win–win situation if they come back and graduate.

- It provides more personal support for our former students who are already anxious about returning to school.

- And, it generates great positive publicity! It shows we value the efforts they have previously invested at our campus.
How did we get started?

- Worked with Institutional Research to identify all the students with 90+ hours, a 2.0 GPA and no disciplinary suspensions who left in the past 7 years.

- Identified an existing unit head to lead the project – Office of Adult Students and Evening Services (OASES)

- Talked with the folks at U. of NM to find out what they did.

- Drafted a business case for our own graduation project and included a proposal in the 5-year strategic plan and annual budget request for 2005–06.

- “Talked it up” with the Provost and others at every opportunity.
Decided to move forward whether we received extra funding or not...

- Enrollment Management provided $5,000 in seed money for fall 2005 to start work on a survey mailing in hopes of more funds!

- Developed a returning student survey after reviewing similar forms from other campuses.

- Refined the group by deleting those who owed money (we had no money to help them eliminate their debts) or had judicial holds.
And...Moore Good News!

- Received $10,000 in one-time funds from Academic Affairs to hire a temp to manage the program in Fall 2005—a graduate intern in adult education.
Identified benefits for the students

- No readmission application fee.

- Academic advising by counselors in Office of Adult Students and Evening Services—available in the evening and Saturday.

- Participants would receive email and phone reminders of important deadlines.

- Informed them of opportunity for scholarship monies. (but very limited funds!)

- Mentoring program and referral service.

- Staff helped students handle the red tape of exceptions, substitutions or special requests.
Nuts and bolts..

- Met with Deans to explain the program and ask for their support – particularly with academic petitions for exceptions.

- Met with Registrar’s staff and they agreed to waive the application fee and expedite applications.

- Set up coding to track readmission in Banner and expedite admission – we code them “FIN” + year of entry.

- Developed 49er Finish web site and brochures. [http://www.oases.uncc.edu/49erfinish.html](http://www.oases.uncc.edu/49erfinish.html)

- Once again asked for permanent funding for fall 2006!
And then...

- Asked the Alumni Office to run the names through the “Alumni Finder” process for current addresses – at a cost of $0.85 per name plus $500 batch fee.

- Sent survey to the remaining 1,229 former seniors in March 2006. (approved by IRB)

- Included a postcard the student could return if they wanted us to contact them about completing their degree.
The results of that first contact??

- 133 responded to the survey.
- Over 100 returned the postcard asking us to contact them about completing their degree.
- OASES staff called all of them individually to see what we could do to assist.
Why do they leave? Our survey results said they....

- Couldn’t get the courses they needed at the times they could take them;
- Had trouble balancing school and life/work demands;
- Couldn’t get adequate advising;
- Couldn’t get enough financial assistance to complete school;
- Dissatisfied with parking –
Initial Results...

- By Fall 2006, 55 students had returned due to this contact!

- These returning students generated approximately $83,000 in tuition, fees and state appropriations.
Some students thought they had already graduated and didn’t know why we were contacting them!!! They got a bit upset!

Some students were able to graduate without returning to school— they just needed help in navigating the red tape!

These students’ lives are very complex. You’ll spend more time resolving issues than with a traditional student. You’ll feel like you adopted some of them!
Welcome!

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte believes that your graduation is paramount to your success.

The 49er Finish Program is a graduation initiative that systematically identifies, recruits, and supports students who have stopped out of the university after earning a majority of the credits needed to complete a degree.

If you would like additional information on the program, please contact Melissa LaMarche, Coordinator, at mlamarch@uncc.edu or the Office of Adult Students and Evening Services at 704-687-6753. You can also read about the program in several news releases.

"Everything worked out really well... and really fast. I'm thankful for your help and encouragement; all of which motivated me to be persistent about finishing my degree."

- H.M., 49er Finish Program student

"I'm enjoying my two classes, and it actually feels good to be a student again. I told my third grade classes at work that I'm studying and taking tests this year just like they are. They're very encouraging, which is certainly welcomed! Thanks again for all your help in getting me started on this journey!"

- L.F., 49er Finish Program student
“This program shows me that UNC Charlotte is interested in nontraditional students, and I am eager to complete my degree. Now my dreams and goals can come true.”

– 49er Finish Program participant

“This is a wonderful opportunity to complete a goal I started a long time ago.”

– 49er Finish Program participant
Results so far..

- Currently communicating with 950 former seniors who have not yet returned.
- 131 more are currently enrolled.
- 42 have applied to graduate in May 2010.
- 311 students recruited by this program have graduated.
- We’ve gotten great publicity for this program!
“I don’t regret leaving when I did. I loved my job at the time, it was exciting to work for Microsoft,” said Bernard, a self-professed over-achiever. She added her decision to leave was the result of “burn out.” Originally starting college in Virginia in 1981, Bernard moved around the country for several years before arriving in Charlotte. She lived in the area for several years before transferring her credits to the University in 1988. By 1993, the lure of full-time employment was too strong.

“I found it easier to go to work; college was the harder choice,” said Bernard.

Now, almost 15 years later, she’s ready to complete her degree.

“I’ve thought about it (finishing) many, many times. But I’d moved all over the country since 1993,” Bernard stated. After exploring options to transfer her credits to other institutions, she gave up after she discovered new transfer students would have to complete a full year of coursework.

Ultimately, Bernard discovered the 49er Finish Program by visiting the University’s home page this past summer. She was living in Maryland and had recently
“At the end of October or November of 2007, I received a brochure about the program through the mail,” stated White, who is a national account representative with National Gypsum Company. “It outlined how the re-admittance process had been streamlined, so I decided to pursue it.”

White said shortly after the start of the year, he was contacted by LaMarche, who e-mailed him all the forms to get him re-enrolled. When he left the University in 1993, he was within six hours of completing a bachelor’s in political science and a minor in history. During the intervening period, degree requirements have changed, and he is awaiting word on whether the departments are going to allow him to complete his degree under the old or new catalog.

For White, this is not his first attempt to finish his degree. About four years after leaving UNC Charlotte, he made inquiries to a former professor. While the professor provided some help, White became frustrated by the process in place at the time. He said he had to physically come to campus each time and had to continually follow up with all the different offices and departments involved, which proved to be too much for a working professional.

With the 49er Finish Program, White found it
Enrollment Management and Academic Affairs have continued to provide one-time funding to do mailings each semester to students who are seniors and have been out 12 months.

- Funded a full-time coordinator position in OASES to manage the program in 2007.
- Provided additional office space for the coordinator in 2007.
- Faculty and staff support makes the program work!!!
The icing on the cake!

- In spring 2008, our Office of Adult Students and Evening Services Director applied for and received a Bernard Osher Foundation Grant of $50,000 to provide re-entry scholarships of $2,000 to $5,000 to adult students for spring and fall 2009!!

- The grant of $50,000 was just renewed for 2010!

- If our program continues to show success in attracting and retaining adult learners, we may receive an endowment of $1,000,000 in four or five years!

More Good News....A National Award for Advising in 2009!

Melissa LaMarche, Coordinator of the 49er Finish Program, attended the National Academic Advising Association annual conference where she accepted an award for Outstanding Institutional Advising Program.

The 49er Finish Program was one of five programs honored in a nationwide competition.
What do the 49er Finish students say about this program?

“From providing the necessary forms to following up with the Registrar’s Office and my respective academic departments to course enrollment, Ms. LaMarche has been unfailing in her commitment and dedication on my behalf.”

“With the 49er Finish Program, you get access to the entire process under one umbrella with resourceful, talented and professional staff to assist you and work on your behalf.”
Where are we now?

- Profile of the former seniors we contact – 32 years of age, 2.68 GPA, completed 113 credit hours before they stopped out!

- Emails and phone calls sent to currently enrolled throughout the year.

- Additional former students are added to the contact group after being out 12 months.

- Each semester more 49er Finish students are graduating!!
Looking forward....what next?

- Expand our pool of former senior prospects – Look further back in our enrollment history to pull students from 1990 to 1997 – mailing about 1,000 letters to this group in April.

- Decide how to deal with former seniors who have financial holds.

- Seeking additional scholarship support.

- Webcam advising, virtual orientations, incorporating on-line options for students at a distance.

- Propose a bachelors of liberal studies? Could we partner with other UNC campuses who have these programs?
Create a program for your campus!

- Develop a business case for the project to gain higher level support:
  - Collect data from historical enrollment files.
  - Project revenue generated by potential enrollments.
  - Craft a proposal for permanent funding or one-time funding to do the initial survey and mailing.

- “Piece meal” it together if you have to:
  - Hire a grad student or intern to get the program moving.
  - Trade on your “good will” to get cooperation from other campus departments.

- Evaluate effectiveness
  - Create codes in your SIS to track applicants; develop a database to log activities; equate credit hours to dollars.
Additional steps..

- Partner with the Registrar’s Office and Admissions Office to move these applicants through the process quickly. (Waive the readmit application fee! Consider giving these students priority registration.)

- Keep your college deans and campus informed.

- Prepare a brief handout to give to everyone who could help you!

- Develop a website and brochures for marketing.

- Use your PR office to get the word out everywhere! (local paper, alumni magazine, homepage link, campus newspaper, list-serves, etc.)
Where else can you look for program models?

- University of New Mexico – “Graduation Project”
- University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh – “Graduation Project”
- “Finish at Home What You Started” at BYU; Bachelor of General Studies
- “Project Complete” at Indiana U, Kokomo
- University of Kentucky – “Project Graduate”/part of the Kentucky Adult Learner Initiative
- University of Utah – “Returning to the U.” program
- Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education – “Non-traditional No More” project supported by the Lumina Foundation
Questions...

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Dallas 2009

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