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# Enrollment Expert Gives Top 5 Reasons Why Student-Retention Strategies Fail

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Los Angeles

Retention is the issue that has led to the creation of a thousand campus task forces. Despite the time and money many colleges spend to improve their graduation rates, however, administrators often describe those rates as an intractable problem. Why?

David H. Kalsbeek offered some answers on Wednesday at the first-ever conference of the University of Southern California's Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice. Mr. Kalsbeek, senior vice president for enrollment management and marketing at DePaul University, proposed five reasons why colleges retention strategies may fail.

**Obfuscation of outcomes.** Mr. Kalsbeek said that administrators often steer discussions of retention away from graduation rates and toward more noble-sounding results, like improving "educational attainment." The problem, he said, is that colleges officials then tend to divert their focus from a clear, quantifiable measure of success.

**Socialism of strategy.** On many campuses, officials use "retention is everyone's responsibility" as a catch phrase. But unless someone, or some office, has responsibility for retention strategies, those approaches are not likely to succeed, Mr. Kalsbeek said. "Admissions, too, is a campuswide

effort," he said, "but there's still one office in charge, one person's job on the line."

**Obsession with outliers.** Colleges tend to devote too much time and resources to students who are the most at risk of failing, Mr. Kalsbeek said. He urged administrators to focus not on "outliers," but on reaching students in "the center of the curve."

**Perseveration on persistence.** Student success is often measured in terms of "persistence"—the percentage of a cohort of students who continue from one academic year to the next. Yet that measure may mask problems particular students are having. "Persistence without progress may be the worst possible outcome," Mr. Kalsbeek said.

**Assuming attributes are achievements.** One might guess that a college with a high graduation rate has a sound retention program, while a college with a lower graduation rate has a less effective one. The truth may not be so simple, said Mr. Kalsbeek, who described graduation rates as "institutional attributes" that indicate the demographic profile of a particular college's students. "Graduation rates are largely a function of what an institution is, not what it does," he said.

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