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Holly Mendelson | Publisher
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Daniel Hecke | Creative Director
Erik Cliburn | Director of Website Operations, Senior Staff Writer
Misty Evans | Director of Digital Content and Strategy, Staff Writer
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Microsoft Helps Colleges Harness AI and Data to Drive Student Success

As higher education faces mounting pressures from shifting enrollments, tightening budgets, and rising expectations for student outcomes, Microsoft is working to help colleges and universities leverage the power of unified data and artificial intelligence (AI). Through its Microsoft Fabric platform, the company aims to equip institutions with tools to break down data silos, improve decision making, and accelerate innovation across campus operations.

According to Microsoft, today's institutions are often hampered by fragmented systems and inconsistent data spread across multiple platforms. "Becoming data empowered takes more than new tools," the company said. "It requires democratized data and insights, a clear strategy, and a culture that supports data-driven decision making." Microsoft Fabric offers a single, AI-powered foundation to connect systems securely and provide leaders, faculty, and staff with trusted insights.

The initiative aligns with EDUCAUSE's 2025 Top 10 IT Issues, which identifies building data-empowered institutions as a top priority for higher education. By leveraging data analytics and AI, colleges can "enhance decision-making, simplify workflows, and empower teams to improve student success," Microsoft said.

Examples from early adopters illustrate how the technology is being used. At Xavier College, administrators consolidated data from 130 disparate systems into Microsoft Azure within seven months, enabling streamlined access to current and historical student and staff information.

Oregon State University, meanwhile, is using Microsoft Security Copilot to strengthen its cybersecurity defenses and elevate proactive security measures, allowing IT analysts to focus on more strategic work.

Microsoft's platform is also helping advance academic research. Using Azure OpenAI, researchers at Georgia Tech analyzed massive amounts of unstructured data to study electric vehicle charging behaviors—a process that, by human effort alone, would require 99 weeks to extract the salient data points.

Institutions like California State University San Marcos and the University of Waterloo are similarly using AI tools to improve student engagement, automate administrative tasks, and enhance career readiness initiatives.

"Becoming a data-empowered institution is a journey, not a destination," Microsoft said. With unified data and AI integration, colleges can move from reacting to challenges to anticipating them—ultimately reshaping how they serve students, manage resources, and pursue discovery. ●

10 Evidence-Based, No Cost Strategies to Boost Student and Faculty Retention

By Misty Evans

For leaders seeking quick wins, these rapid-read strategies offer immediate, research-supported impact.

Launch Micrograns for Emergency Needs

Research from the Hope Center and multiple community college pilots shows small emergency grants can reduce stop-outs and significantly improve term-to-term persistence. Institutions can reallocate unused foundation funds or partner with donors for rapid deployment.

Create a First-Year-to-Career Map

Georgia State University's analytics-driven advising model demonstrates that clear academic-to-career roadmaps improve progression and close equity gaps. Academic departments can draft simple visual maps aligned with existing curriculum sheets.

Build Structured Belonging Rituals

Belonging is one of the strongest predictors of retention, according to work from Stanford psychologist Gregory Walton. Quick wins include welcome videos from department chairs, first-week cohort mixers, and faculty "get to know me" slides.

Implement Early-Alert Check-Ins by Week Three

Research shows that the first four weeks in a semester predicts outcomes. Faculty can submit flags or "nudges" leading to proactive outreach by advisers or student success coaches.

Create a Predictable Communication Cadence

Studies from EAB and Tyton Partners show students persist at higher rates when communication is consistent, predictable, and personalized. Weekly "What to Expect This Week" emails or texts reduce anxiety and increase engagement.

Audit High DFW (drop, fail, withdraw) Courses for Quick Interventions

National data from institutional research associations consistently show that DFW rates correlate with attrition. Chairs and faculty can review assignments, grading patterns, and assessment timing to identify low-cost adjustments.

Establish Peer-Led Learning Communities

Student peer mentoring is one of the most cost-effective persistence tools. Research from NASPA and the National College Learning Center Association highlights improved GPAs, increased sense of belonging, and higher retention rates among participating students.

Standardize Course Navigation in the Learning Management System

The University of Central Florida's large-scale online learning research found that standardized course shells reduce cognitive load and increase completion rates. An academic technology team can create a simple template that faculty can adopt.

Hold Monthly Faculty Connection Circles

Faculty retention improves when employees feel heard and supported. Studies from the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) show that regular peer-to-peer forums increase morale and reduce burnout.

Create "Finish-Line" Advising for Near-Completers

Institutions such as Wayne State University have seen dramatic increases in graduation rates by targeting students within 15–30 credits of completing their degrees. A quick data pull can identify candidates for tailored outreach.

Former U.S. Surgeons General Sound the Alarm on Social Media and Youth Mental Health

By Erik Cliburn

Six former U.S. surgeons general gathered at Dartmouth College on Oct. 27 for a rare joint discussion on the worsening youth mental health crisis, identifying social media as a major driver of what they described as an unprecedented public health emergency.

The event, co-hosted by Dartmouth's Geisel School of Medicine, Dartmouth Health, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), marked only the third time in history that so many former surgeons general have convened to address a single health issue.

The forum took place during "A Global Turning Point: Why Youth Well-Being Is in Crisis—and What We Must Do About It," a three-day symposium that brought together experts in medicine, policy, and economics from around the world. For Dartmouth President Sian Leah Beilock, the gathering embodied the institution's ongoing commitment to leadership in mental health scholarship and intervention.

"We are really deeply honored to bring the best minds in the world on issues around young people's mental health together for this historic symposium," Beilock said, noting that improving student well-being has been one of her top priorities since taking office in 2023.

A Problem Not Recognized Soon Enough

More than 500 people attended the surgeons general panel, with hundreds more tuning in via livestream. The discussion was moderated by Tim Wilens, MD, president-elect of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Chief of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital.

Opening the session, Antonia Coello Novello, MD—who served under President George H.W. Bush—delivered a stark warning about the scope of the problem.

"When you have 31% of United

States children, one out of three, having some kind of mental issue in the last 30 days, you have a problem," Novello said. "But what worries me the most, one out of five have thought about suicide. Sixteen percent have made a plan, and 9% have accomplished it."

Novello said the surge in youth mental illness correlates directly with the spread of unregulated social media use. "I believe that social media is one of the biggest causes of children having problems," she said, pointing to cyberbullying, loneliness, and body image pressures that have proliferated in the digital age.

Richard Carmona, MD, surgeon general under President George W. Bush, reflected on how technology's rapid rise outpaced society's understanding of its risks.

"I don't think anybody fully appreciated what the ultimate consequences of the digital age would be upon us, and so now we're trying to fix it because we didn't recognize it to begin with," Carmona said.

Carmona, who also served as a trauma surgeon and public health expert, emphasized that the mental health of America's youth should be treated as a national security concern.

From Treatment to Prevention

Several panelists underscored the need to move beyond crisis response and toward prevention and community building. Jerome Adams, who served as surgeon general during President Donald Trump's first term, said the nation must rethink how it allocates mental health resources.

"We spend a disproportionate amount of our resources on diagnosis and treatment and not on prevention and wellness," Adams said. "I think oftentimes that conversation comes at the expense of thinking about mental health, not as mental illness, but as mental wellness, and what can we do to create communities that are more supportive of our young people."

Adams also raised alarms about new and emerging risks, including increasing marijuana potency and the explosion of online sports gambling, both of which he said are worsening addiction and mental health issues among young men.

Joycelyn Elders, surgeon general

From left to right and top to bottom: Former U.S. Surgeons General Vivek H. Murthy, MD, MBA; Antonia Coello Novello, MD, MPH, DrPH; Jerome M. Adams, MD, MPH, FASA; Joycelyn Elders, MD; Richard H. Carmona, MD, MPH, FACS; and David Satcher, MD, PhD, joined Tim Wilens, MD, chief of the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, for a panel discussion at Dartmouth College examining the impact of social media on youth mental health during the "A Global Turning Point: Why Youth Well-Being Is in Crisis—and What We Must Do About It" symposium.

during the Clinton administration, called for simple, immediate steps parents and schools can take, like establishing tech-free zones and enforcing screen-off times at night to protect children's sleep and reduce social media dependence.

"That keeps the kids from being on the phone all night. … These are things that parents could do today," Elders said.

She also encouraged adults to create safe spaces for open dialogue with children and to recognize the broader environmental factors affecting youth mental health including poverty, gun violence, and exclusion. "Our mental health is the most valuable resource we'll ever have, and our children are at stake," Elders said.

The Social Media Effect

Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, who served under both the Obama and Biden administrations, reinforced the link between excessive social media use and poor mental health outcomes.

"Adolescents who were using 3.5 hours a day or more of social media faced double the risk of anxiety and depression symptoms," Murthy said. "And the average use today among adolescents is 4.8 hours. It's well beyond that threshold."

Murthy said there is currently no evidence proving social media is safe for minors and called for age-appropriate restrictions. "Impulse control isn't fully developed yet," he said. "My belief is that delaying the use of social media until past early adolescence—until at least 16, and potentially later, depending on a child's maturity—is eminently reasonable and advisable."

He also warned that isolation and disconnection—exacerbated by online life—have become "an epidemic of loneliness." Roughly half of young people, he noted, struggle with loneliness, which "increases our risk of anxiety, depression, and suicide," as well as physical illnesses such as heart disease and dementia. "Loneliness is not only extraordinarily common—it's also consequential," Murthy said.

The Need for Accountability and Awareness

David Satcher, MD, PhD, who released the first Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health in 1999, urged policymakers to confront the stigma that still deters families from reaching out for assistance.

"Parents often neglect to seek care for their children due to embarrassment and fear that such a diagnosis might interfere with the child's future," Satcher said. "We must acknowledge and find ways to overcome the barriers of stigma. We need to build public awareness regarding mental health and effective treatment."

Satcher and others also pointed to the shortage of mental health professionals and the need for expanded training opportunities to meet the growing demand.

Balancing Hope and Urgency

While the panelists agreed that social media has played a destructive role, they also acknowledged technology's potential for good—particularly in telehealth and predictive analytics that could improve access and early intervention.

"AI and the aggregated data and predictive analytics hold great hope when we look at the mental health challenges," Carmona noted, adding that a coordinated national strategy for mental health data could drive better decisions across agencies.

The Dartmouth UNDP symposium drew hundreds of experts, students, and policymakers from across the globe, united in the shared goal of addressing what organizers called "a global turning point" in youth well-being.

For many attendees, including medical students at Geisel, the opportunity to hear directly from those who have shaped national health policy was transformative.

"They stressed the importance of listening and intentionally addressing mental health interpersonally because of both its realistic application and effectiveness," said Geisel student Ariana Stephens.

That message of shared responsibility and action was echoed in closing remarks throughout the weekend.

"These are coordination problems," said Pedro Conceição, director of the UNDP's Human Development Report Office. "And coordination problems are much easier to solve and address, because we all want the same thing. So I think there is hope here."

At Dartmouth, that sense of optimism is grounded in evidence. President Beilock pointed to recent campus survey data showing that the share of students at risk for moderate to severe depression dropped from 33% in 2021 to 24% in 2024, while those who believe Dartmouth prioritizes mental health rose from 44% to 73%.

"We still have significant work ahead," Beilock said, "but we also have hope and evidence that we can identify the interventions that truly make a difference." ●

At Dartmouth, that sense of optimism is grounded in evidence. President Beilock pointed to recent campus survey data showing that the share of students at risk for moderate to severe depression dropped from 33% in 2021 to 24% in 2024, while those who believe Dartmouth prioritizes mental health rose from 44% to 73%.

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Social Workers Boost Student Retention At UA Little Rock

By Misty Evans

In lieu of sending students across campus to a counseling center or financial aid office, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock now places licensed social workers directly inside each of its campus colleges where they serve as student support specialists and case managers.

A 2024 article in Metropolitan Universities describes the model as a decentralized, college-specific system that partners academic affairs with student affairs to deliver a holistic, integrated approach that students can access within their own academic units.

A Case Management Model

The student support specialists offer case management services that range from triaging at-risk students to coordinating on-campus and community resources. They also administer small emergency micro-grants meant to bridge short-term financial gaps that might otherwise push students to withdraw from college.

The role is designed to address challenges that go far beyond academics. In the College of Business, Health, and Human Services, for example, specialist Mia Polk-Hampton is available to help with academic challenges, emotional distress, work-life balance, financial hardship, and referrals to university and community resources.

In 2021, the university highlighted student support specialist and licensed clinical social worker Gertrude Thompkins who serves students in the STEM and Humanities and Social Sciences colleges. Thompkins said she focused on connecting students to resources that many did not know existed. "Sometimes students aren't aware of the Trojan Food Pantry, Counseling Services, and all of the different resources the university offers," she said. "I try to relieve any stressors the students are having by connecting them with the resources they need."

Heather Reed, director of student retention initiatives, said Thompkins' addition to the retention office "has been uplifting for students who face barriers to their student success," noting that a social worker helps them navigate campus and community resources so they can focus on their academics.

The positions are funded in part by UA Little Rock's Student Success Endowment Fund, established in 2020 with a $25 million anonymous gift to support retention and success initiatives permanently.

Meeting Students Where They Are

For Carrie Phillips, the university's chief communications and marketing officer, embedding social workers in every academic college is a strategic response to the realities students face today. Speaking in a 2025 webinar on recruiting Generation Alpha, Phillips described the model as one of UA Little Rock's most compelling innovations.

"A business student's needs may look very different than an engineering student's needs," Phillips said. "You don't have to make that journey by yourself across campus … That faculty member is there to tell you, 'Let me take you right down the hall.'"

Her comments underscore a key design feature of the program being proximity. By embedding social workers in college offices where students already go for advising or to see faculty, UA Little Rock reduces the stigma and logistical barriers that can keep students from seeking help with mental health, financial stress, or family crises.

Tackling Root Causes of Attrition

The case management model is grounded in growing evidence that nonacademic life barriers, not just grades or tuition bills, often drive students out of college. A random controlled trial of an intensive case management program for low-income community college students found that addressing personal, financial, and logistical obstacles through coaching, referrals, and emergency financial help significantly increased persistence and degree completion.

Research on basic needs insecurity shows why this matters. A national representative study has found that roughly one in five college students experience food insecurity, with even higher rates at some campuses. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice reported that nearly 34% of students in its 2020 survey faced this challenge, with millions more having only marginal food security.

Emergency aid can make a

difference. Evaluations of Lumina Foundation's Dreamkeepers and Angel Fund emergency financial aid programs found that more than 2,400 community college and tribal college students received over $845,000 in emergency grants in their first two years, helping them cover housing, transportation, child care, and utilities during crises that threatened their enrollment. Both students and administrators reported that such aid helped students stay in school.

Early Results and Lessons Learned

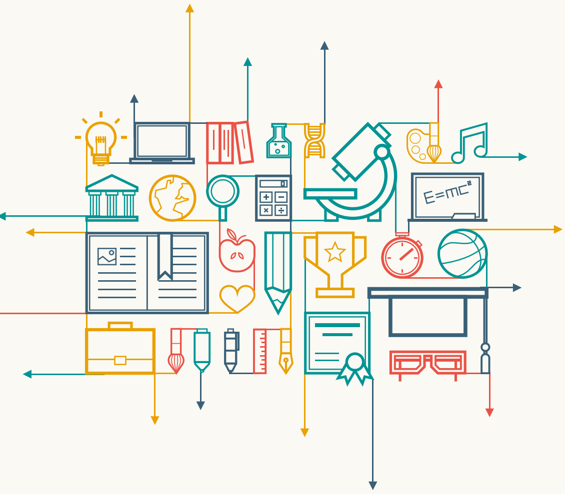
While UA Little Rock's model is still being studied, early evaluation data from the Metropolitan Universities article show that a diverse group of students across multiple disciplines are using the college-based case management services. The authors report that retention rates for those who receive services vary by the issues they present with, suggesting that students facing complex combinations of financial, academic, and personal stressors may need more intensive or sustained support.

The program is also integrated into campus-wide safety and care structures. Student support specialists serve on UA Little Rock's Care Team, which brings together representatives from academic affairs, student services, and campus safety to coordinate responses when students are struggling or in distress.

The program also uses data collection to track usage, outcomes, and which interventions are most effective.

Even in its early stages, this approach reflects a broader shift in how colleges think about retention. Rather than treating mental health, financial insecurity, trauma, and life stress as "outside" problems, the university has anchored social work and crisis response inside the heart of academic life.

For students who might otherwise leave school when life unravels, the message is simple: support is not somewhere else. It's right down the hall.●



Coordinated Advising and Student Success Ecosystems Move the Needle on Retention

By Erik Cliburn

As enrollment volatility continues to unsettle higher education, a growing number of institutions are treating student success not as a single office's responsibility but as a campus-wide operating principle. From institutions like Roanoke College to Ohio University and Santa Fe College, the most promising retention gains are coming from coordinated advising models, data-informed interventions, and comprehensive wraparound support.

Building Coordinated Student Success Ecosystems

At Roanoke College, a sharper focus on student success infrastructure has pushed the fall 2024 freshman retention rate to 81%, a near 10-year high and well above the national average of 69.5%, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Rather than relying solely on traditional academic advising, Roanoke has expanded its Student Success Division, added a role dedicated to student success strategies, and created a Retention Task Force that brings together representatives from across campus.

These changes are designed to systematically identify why students might consider leaving and what interventions keep them enrolled. The task force coordinates efforts among academic affairs, student engagement, athletics, and campus operations to build a student-ready culture where belonging is treated as a retention metric. Targeted programming in the first six weeks, expanded academic coaching, and forums that allow students to adjust schedules and learn about resources before the drop period are all part of a strategy to intervene early and often.

Advising is central to this approach. Roanoke has moved from a more diffuse faculty advising model to one that incorporates professional academic coaches and advisors who can provide strategic, intentional, and personalized academic advising on a continual basis. The goal is to make sure students feel known, monitored, and supported from the moment they arrive, not just at registration crunch times.

> **Learning communities, which reach 98% of its first-year students, extend that support into the classroom and residential experience, while second-year experience programming maintains momentum beyond the first-year push.**

Aligning Academic Support and Advising at Scale

Ohio University is pursuing a similar logic on a larger scale by consolidating key student-facing functions into the new Office of Student Success and Academic Innovation. The reorganization unites the Academic Achievement Center, experiential learning, learning communities, signature academic experience programs, and advising, retention, and graduation initiatives under one umbrella.

The structure is designed to break down silos, which often undermine retention work. Centralized leadership over advising and success technology allows the university to align policies and outreach across all colleges and campuses. Academic support services—such as peer tutoring, writing assistance, and large-group peer-assisted learning sessions—are coordinated with proactive advising, major exploration, and degree-completion help.

Technology is another pillar of Ohio's retention strategy. A new version of Slate, a technology system for managing student data, tracking interactions, and coordinating support service that is dedicated to student success supports academic alerts, midterm progress surveys, and new-student success surveys. Success advisors can see outreach history, risk indicators, and engagement patterns in one place, making it easier to deliver timely, targeted interventions. Learning communities, which reach 98% of their first-year students, extend that support into the classroom and residential experience, while second-year experience programming maintains momentum beyond the first-year push.

Targeted Support

Community colleges and regional institutions are likewise investing in intensive support models for their most vulnerable students.

Santa Fe College in Florida recently received $4.46 million in federal grants to sustain and expand its TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) programs. SSS provides individualized academic coaching, financial aid and scholarship guidance, tutoring, mentoring, and transfer assistance for low-income, first-generation students and students with disabilities.

“The TRIO SSS grants have had a profound impact on our students for more than 40 years,” Santa Fe College President Paul Broadie, PhD, said. “Receiving this grant enables us to continue our transformative work, ensuring that students get the support they need to succeed in the classroom and thrive in their careers.”

The model pairs students with dedicated academic coaches who help them navigate everything from FAFSA forms to course selection and emergency needs. National data from the U.S. Department of Education show that SSS participants are significantly more likely to complete degrees or transfer than similar peers outside the program, underscoring the power of sustained, high-touch support.

Adapting Retention Strategies for Prison Education

Retention work is also evolving in less visible spaces, such as prison education programs, where incarcerated students face many of the same academic and financial barriers as their peers on the outside, plus layers of logistical, technological, and systemic constraints. Leaders in these initiatives stress that advising and student success work must be both persistent and adaptive.

Some programs employ tenured and tenure-track faculty inside facilities and maintain those relationships after students are released, creating continuity in mentoring and academic guidance.

> **“The TRIO SSS grants have had a profound impact on our students for more than 40 years. Receiving this grant enables us to continue our transformative work, ensuring that students get the support they need to succeed in the classroom and thrive in their careers.”**
>
> **Santa Fe College President Paul Broadie, PhD**

Partnership-based “2+2” ecosystems, such as the Transformation and Reentry Through Education and Community program at Metropolitan State University, link an associate degree at a partner institution with a bachelor’s program at the university. Structured learning labs, regular meetings with dedicated faculty advisors, and intentional re-entry programming ensure that education is framed as a long-term trajectory, not a series of disconnected courses. Emergency aid, pre-college academic preparation, and tailored tutoring help students address gaps in math, reading, and writing so they can succeed in college-level work.

Across these varied settings, common best practices emerge. The most effective student success and advising strategies:

- Treat retention as a shared responsibility that spans academics, student life, and operations.
- Use data and early-alert systems to identify risk and trigger timely interventions.
- Build cohort and community structures that foster belonging.
- Combine professional advising with mentoring, tutoring, and emergency financial support.
- Design clear academic pathways, including for nontraditional and justice-impacted students, with multiple milestones and strong transfer or reentry bridges.

In an era when every enrolled student matters, these coordinated models suggest that retention gains are rarely accidental. They are the product of intentional ecosystems where advising is integrated, support is holistic, and student success is central to an institutional strategy. ●

Closing the Retention Gap Through Increases in Financial Aid

By Erik Cliburn

For many students, the question of staying enrolled in college has less to do with academics than with finances. From rising living costs to unexpected emergencies, a single expense can derail progress toward a degree. Increasingly, colleges and universities are responding by treating financial aid not only as an access tool but as a core retention strategy—one that can make the difference between persistence and dropping out, especially for low-income and first-generation students.

A growing body of research underscores this connection. At the University of Wisconsin–Madison (UW–Madison), a long-term study recently published in the Peabody Journal of Education found that Bucky's Tuition Promise—an institutional aid program offering four years of tuition and fees for in-state freshmen from families earning $65,000 or less—boosts second-year retention by several percentage points. The program, launched in 2018, is one of the most prominent examples of how simplifying aid and guaranteeing affordability can improve students' chances of staying on track academically.

"This finding is the latest evidence that Bucky's Tuition Promise is having a positive effect on student success and on the university as a whole," said Scott Owczarek, interim vice provost for enrollment management at UW–Madison. "Bucky's Tuition Promise was designed to make an education at the state's flagship public university more affordable and accessible for Wisconsin students. It is doing that while also helping to ensure that our state's top students stay in Wisconsin and contribute their talents and their skills to our campus and our communities."

The study's lead author, research analyst Amberly Dziesinski, PhD, of UW–Madison's Student Success Through Applied Research Lab, examined students clustered around the program's income eligibility threshold. Those who qualified had a second-year retention rate of 96.6%, compared to 93.4% among similar students just above the cutoff.

"This difference held up to rigorous statistical testing, to the point that we can say the difference is caused by Bucky's Tuition Promise," Dziesinski wrote.

At an institution where retention is already high, a three-percentage-point increase is notable. Dziesinski also compared a broader sample of 1,300 program recipients with 1,912 non-recipients from families earning below $120,000.

Even across this wider range, Promise students posted slightly higher second-year retention rates—95.8%, compared to 94.9%. "Overall, it's really promising to see that new populations of students who were brought to campus through Bucky's Tuition Promise are succeeding at such high rates," she said.

The study found early but inconclusive indications that the program may also reduce debt, though more longitudinal research is needed. Still, the findings reinforce a central theme in higher education policy: that affordability is about more than getting students to enroll—it is about keeping them enrolled through graduation.

Emergency Aid as a Lifeline

While tuition guarantees support long-term planning, emergency financial aid aims to meet immediate, often unpredictable needs. According to the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC), nearly 19% of undergraduates in 2020 reported they would struggle to find $500 for an unexpected expense—an amount that could determine whether or not a student stays in school.

Colleges nationwide now operate emergency aid programs offering small, rapid-response grants for expenses such as car repairs, childcare disruptions, housing instability, or medical costs. BPC notes that these interventions can play a critical role in supporting student success by preventing short-term crises from cascading into withdrawal.

Evidence of their effectiveness is mixed, however, partly because students who seek emergency aid often face multiple barriers affecting academic performance. Administrators interviewed by BPC emphasized that emergency aid works best when integrated with wraparound services that address underlying needs.

One community college president described receiving a request for funds to purchase a blanket—an indication that the student was living out of a car. In such cases, emergency aid can stabilize a student's situation temporarily, but persistence often hinges on coordinated support from financial aid offices, basic-needs centers, case managers, and academic advisers.

Programs such as Washington State's Student Emergency Assistance Grant (SEAG) require institutions to refer aid applicants to additional on- and off-campus services, reflecting a shift toward holistic financial and academic support models.

Funding remains a challenge. In 2023, Washington state institutions received more than $32 million in SEAG requests, but were able to grant only about $4 million. Even so, data-driven targeting can stretch limited resources.

Georgia State University's Panther Retention Grant, for example, shifted its focus from freshmen to seniors after institutional data revealed that students closest to graduation were most likely to drop out due to unpaid tuition balances. Analysis showed the redesigned program helped recipients graduate faster and with less debt.

TRIO Programs

Alongside institutional aid, federal TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) programs remain a cornerstone of retention efforts for underserved student populations. Santa Fe College (SF) recently received $4.4 million in new federal grants to support TRIO SSS, which provides academic tutoring, financial literacy coaching, scholarship guidance, mentoring, and personal counseling.

"The TRIO SSS grants have had a profound impact on our students for more than 40 years," SF President Paul Broadie, PhD, said. "Receiving this grant enables us to continue our transformative work, ensuring that students get the support they need to succeed in the classroom and thrive in their careers."

National data underscores the program's impact. A 2019 U.S. Department of Education evaluation found that SSS students at four-year institutions were 18% more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than their peers not enrolled in the program.

Other campuses are expanding TRIO programs as well. The University of Iowa secured a renewal of its federal SSS grant to continue providing tutoring, mentoring, financial aid guidance, and career exploration services. "This grant allows the university to deepen our commitment to ensuring that all students—regardless of background—can thrive academically and personally," said Jennifer Lynch, TRIO programs director.

Drury University's Drury GO Monett campus also launched its first TRIO SSS program through a $680,750 federal grant. "TRIO Student Support Services will be the cornerstone of our student support strategy," said Rhonda Schilly, senior director of Drury GO Monett. The program will offer tutoring, financial literacy workshops, graduate school preparation, and financial aid assistance, with plans for a dedicated tutoring center.

The Growing Consensus

Across these diverse initiatives, a shared conclusion is emerging: students who are financially secure are better positioned to persist through academic challenges, remain enrolled, and graduate. Tuition guarantee programs reduce uncertainty and upfront barriers; emergency grants prevent short-term disruptions from becoming long-term setbacks; and comprehensive support programs help students navigate the academic and financial aspects of college simultaneously.

As institutions face mounting pressure to improve retention and completion rates—especially in online and hybrid programs—financial aid is becoming an indispensable part of the student success infrastructure. The research from UW–Madison and the national growth of emergency aid and TRIO programs together suggest that when colleges invest deeply in students' financial stability, the return on investment is measured not only in enrollment figures, but in degrees earned.

The Power of Prediction

How Early Warning Systems Are Changing Student Retention

By Misty Evans

When a student at Georgia State University logs in less frequently to the learning management system (LMS), misses a quiz, or falls behind on a tuition payment, someone on campus usually knows within hours.

For more than a decade, Georgia State has wired its advising, financial aid, and student information systems into a predictive analytics engine that monitors hundreds of risk indicators for every undergraduate. The system generates tens of thousands of alerts a year that prompt advisors to call, email, or text students before a temporary setback becomes a reason to drop out.

Across the country, colleges and universities are taking a similar approach. Early warning systems mine real-time data from LMS, course gradebooks, financial records, and advising notes, to identify students who may be at risk. These tools allow institutions to intervene earlier and more precisely. However, they can also raise serious questions about privacy, surveillance, bias, and trust.

Predictive analytics and early warning tools are reshaping student success, the outcomes institutions say they are producing, and ways colleges are trying to balance powerful data with responsible use. Climate assessment tools, such as Viewfinder Campus Climate Surveys also reveal early institution-wide risks to belonging and retention long before they manifest in withdrawal statistics.

Behavioral Data Leads to Early Intervention

Early alert systems work by aggregating and analyzing multiple data points that have been statistically linked to lower persistence or course success. These might include missed assignments, declining quiz scores, LMS logins, course withdrawals, financial aid gaps, or extended periods without contact with an advisor.

Research on learning analytics shows that these tools, when combined with targeted interventions, can predict course failure and attrition with reasonable accuracy. Studies of learning analytics systems consistently find that LMS activity, prior performance, and engagement are strong predictors of student success, particularly when institutions act on these signals promptly.

Institutions that report meaningful retention gains also describe substantial investments in training advisors to interpret alerts, restructure caseloads, embed tutoring and financial support into advising practices, and ensure that faculty buy into the early warning model.

A Case Study: Georgia State's Panther Retention Grants

Georgia State is widely recognized for its analytics-driven student success model. One of its best-known initiatives—the Panther Retention Grant program—began after the university analyzed years of financial and academic records and discovered a troubling pattern. More than 1,000 otherwise successful students were being dropped each semester because they owed small balances, often just a few hundred dollars.

According to state policy, students with outstanding balances had to be removed from course rosters in the first week. Georgia State's predictive analytics system showed these students were, in most cases, on track to graduate. Rather than lose them, the university created an emergency microgrant program to erase the balance and keep them enrolled.

Since its launch in 2011, more than 11,000 Panther Retention Grants have been awarded. Roughly 86% of recipients go on to graduate, most within two semesters. Independent evaluations have also found that the program pays for itself by preserving tuition revenue from students who would otherwise drop out.

Georgia State's experience demonstrates a critical lesson. Predictive analytics are most potent when paired with concrete, rapid-response interventions.

A Case Study: Northern Arizona University's Early Alert and Integration Work

Northern Arizona University (NAU) employs a complementary model that integrates course-level warning systems with enterprise-wide data. NAU's Grade Performance Status (GPS) system enables faculty to flag concerns related to student attendance, participation, and academic performance early in the term. Alerts feed directly to advisors and student support offices.

NAU has also integrated its predictive analytics platform with Salesforce, giving staff real-time insight into student interaction patterns across advising, tutoring, outreach campaigns, and administrative offices. Administrators report that this integrated approach helps them detect disengagement, coordinate responses, and track whether specific interventions are improving student outcomes.

The university has also redesigned foundational courses using adaptive learning tools: AI-driven platforms that personalize education or training by adjusting content, pace, and assessments to each learner's needs. A case study from Every Learner Everywhere showed that pass rates in targeted gateway courses rose from 84 percent to 88 percent after NAU adopted adaptive courseware.

Together, NAU's early alerts, analytics engines, and adaptive learning systems create a layered support structure that identifies risk at multiple points.

Beyond Individual Alerts: Tracking Climate as an Early Warning Signal

Predictive analytics typically operate at the individual level. But climate data can serve as an early warning system for entire groups who may feel unsafe, unseen, or disconnected long before those feelings appear in retention data.

Campus climate surveys like Viewfinder offer institutions comprehensive assessments of how they are performing regarding belonging, safety, respect, and community. Participating campuses receive interactive dashboards that allow leaders to look at student perception by demographic group, religion, political affiliation and more, to see where issues and gaps might exist.

The Viewfinder National Campus Climate Data Center (NCCDC) brings together de-identified responses from more than 120,000 students and 90,000 employees across nearly 150 institutions, offering leaders a rare national lens on belonging, identity, safety, and institutional trust.

Belonging and Retention: The National Picture

Independent research consistently shows that belonging is one of the strongest non-academic predictors of persistence.

A national study by Gopalan and Brady found that first-year students with a very low sense of belonging were 14 percentage points less likely to persist into their second and third years than peers who reported very high belonging.

This research explains why collecting campus climate data, and especially subgroup differences, is increasingly seen as strategic rather than ancillary.

What the National Data Center Reveals

When asked which demographic groups report the lowest belonging and safety across institutions, the Viewfinder data show the trends are stark.

“The data are clear that, in general, students from historically underrepresented backgrounds and identities, such as students of color and students with disabilities, are retained at lower rates than their counterparts,” Gabriel Reif, PhD, vice president for research and evaluation for Viewfinder, says. “However, the findings from the NCCDC show that having multiple underrepresented identities is associated with an even lower sense of belonging and more negative sentiments about the institution.”

Students at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, students with disabilities who are also LGBTQIA+ and students of color, reported some of the lowest overall climate ratings.

Among all student respondents across the NCCDC, 79% said they would recommend their institution. But among students who identified as having a disability, being LGBTQIA+, and being a person of color, only 65 percent said they would recommend their institution.

“That is a significant gap,” Reif said, “and one that should prompt institutions to assess whether their programming, campus culture, and resource allocation truly support their most vulnerable students.”

While Reif explains that the NCCDC does not directly track institutional interventions, decades of climate research point to several high-impact strategies:

- Structured first-year programs that intentionally build social ties
- Faculty training in inclusive teaching practices
- Identity-affirming spaces and cultural centers, with proper staffing and funding
- Transparent, well-implemented bias-response systems
- Research-backed social-belonging interventions

“These kinds of interventions have been shown to strengthen belonging and improve students’ perceptions of institutional support,” Reif said. “Employees at each campus know their context best, but the evidence base is strong.”

How Institutions Use Climate Data Alongside Predictive Analytics

Institutions increasingly want to connect climate findings to retention and success metrics. Reif explained that while Viewfinder’s national dashboards provide valuable context, campuses must run their own climate studies to understand local patterns.

“The NCCDC helps institutions understand national trends that may shape students’ experiences,” Gabe Reif said. “For example, we see that fewer Jewish students, compared to others, feel their peers respect their religious beliefs. Institutions can use that to guide policy and programming decisions. But to connect climate data to student success metrics, institutions need to conduct their own climate study.”

Why? Because every campus has its own hot spots.

“At one institution, it may be students with disabilities and tenured faculty who are especially dissatisfied,” he said. “At another, it may be students from low-income backgrounds and hourly staff. These variations matter when institutions try to link climate to engagement, help-seeking behavior, or retention.”

Institutions can then pair climate findings with predictive analytics to identify:

- Departments where belonging is lowest
- Populations most likely to disengage
- Early signs of burnout among

faculty and staff

- Groups with a declining likelihood of recommending the institution
- Populations reporting low safety or low respect

This allows colleges to build "next-generation" early warning systems that blend academic, behavioral, and climate data.

Emerging Trends and Future Risks

Looking ahead to 2026, Reif pointed to several risks higher education leaders should monitor:

- External policy shifts, such as changes to immigration or gender-affirming health care laws, may influence students' sense of safety and belonging
- The rising cost of living disproportionately affects low-income and working-class students
- Reductions in federal funding, including concerns about future Pell Grant support
- Political tensions and identity-based polarization, which can influence peer respect and feelings of acceptance

"These broader forces shape institutional climate in real time," he said. "Leaders must consider how the experiences of their most vulnerable students may be affected."

The Ethics Question: Where Is the Line?

As institutions expand their use of predictive analytics, privacy and ethics concerns remain at the forefront. Scholars warn that student data systems raise fundamental questions about consent, autonomy, and surveillance. Students may not fully understand which data are collected, how they are used, who has access to them, or how long they are stored.

Professional groups such as EDUCAUSE advise institutions to establish governance structures, audit algorithms for bias, and ensure that automated predictions complement rather than replace human judgment.

Despite the sophistication of predictive tools, the most consistent finding across case studies is simple: analytics work best when they reinforce human relationships.

At Georgia State, advisors respond to thousands of alerts through honest conversations, by phone, text, or in person. At Northern Arizona, the success of early alerts depends on faculty participation and coordinated outreach. And climate dashboards only matter when institutions act visibly on their findings: sharing results, creating task forces, revising policies, and investing in belonging-focused initiatives.

The promise of predictive analytics and climate dashboards findings is not that they can fully forecast risk, but that they reveal early signals for institutions to act. The most effective systems help institutions see students more clearly, where they are thriving, where they are struggling, and where the institution itself may be falling short.

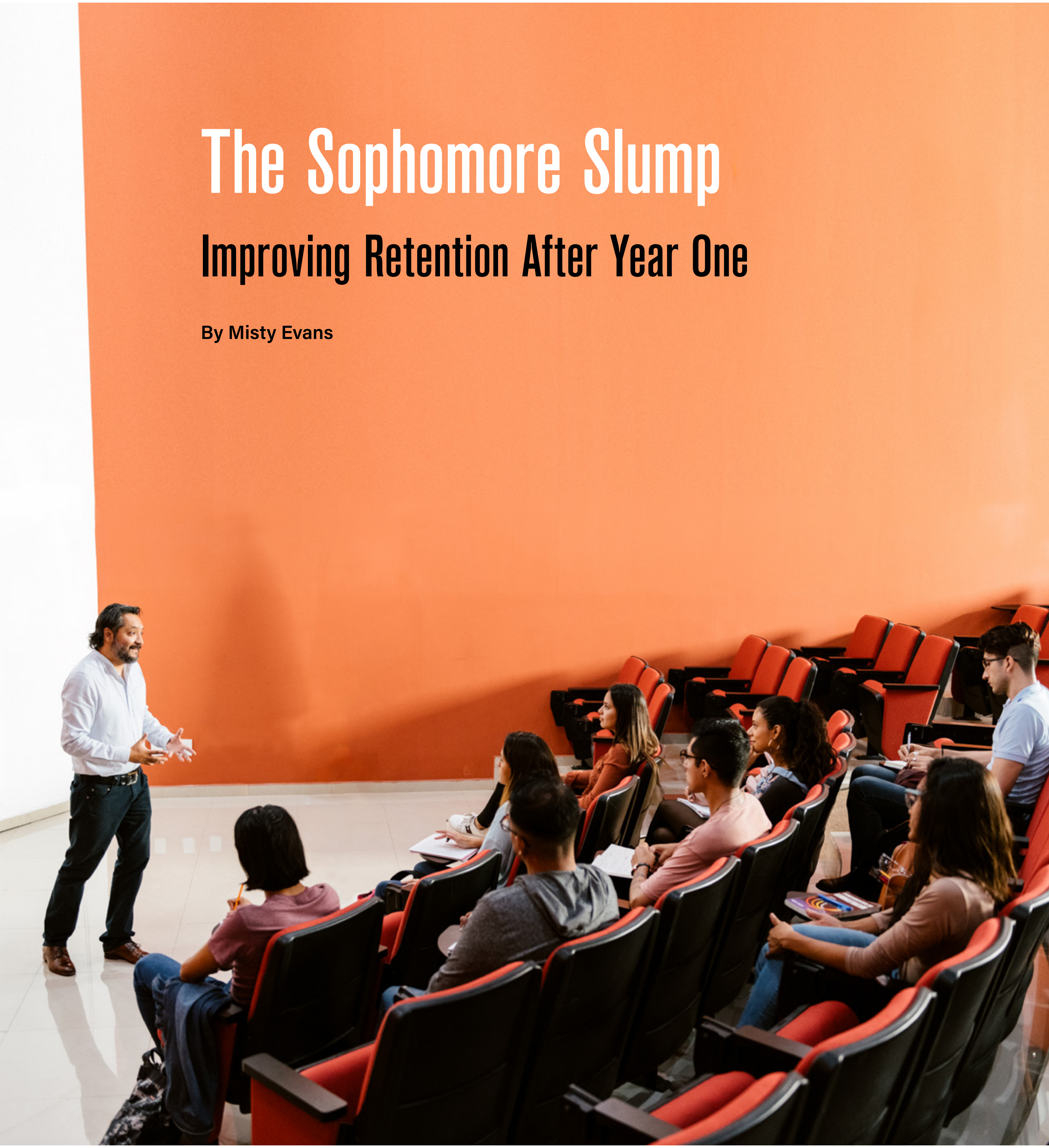
As more colleges adopt real-time data tools, the central question shifts from "Can we predict who is at risk?" to "What will we change once we know?"

The institutions that answer that second question with urgency and compassion are most likely to achieve the most significant gains in student success. ●

The Sophomore Slump

Improving Retention After Year One

By Misty Evans



Colleges pour an extraordinary amount of time and money into first-year experience programs, but many students still disappear between sophomore move-in and junior year. Known as the "sophomore slump," this remains an under-addressed retention gap even as national persistence rates inch back toward pre-pandemic levels.

Nearly 76% of the 2.4 million students who started college in fall 2021 returned for their second year, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's 2023 Persistence and Retention report. More recent Clearinghouse data show that for the fall 2023 cohort, second-year fall semester persistence reached 77.6%, and second-year fall semester retention, students who remained enrolled at their original institution, was at 69.5%.

Those figures are a recovery, but they still mean roughly one in four first-time students do not make it to a third fall semester. The steepest drop-off tends to occur after the highly structured, resource-rich first year, when early-alert systems, orientation programs, and mandatory advising taper off.

What Changes in Year Two

Research on sophomore experiences points to a cluster of challenges that tend to converge in year two, including major and career decisions, financial stress, shifting social groups, and a move off campus that can sever ties to support networks. As students leave residence halls and intensive first-year seminars, they can feel less connected academically and socially even as expectations rise.

National survey data on sophomore initiatives compiled by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition underscore that institutions have historically invested far more in first-year support. In that survey, academic advising was the most common primary sophomore initiative. Still, relatively few campuses reported dedicated second-year living-learning communities, credit-bearing sophomore seminars, or structured career exploration programs.

At the same time, financial and life pressures remain a major driver of attrition. Clearinghouse data show that work and family obligations compound academic hurdles for older students.

Against that backdrop, a growing number of institutions are now treating the second year as a critical transition point.

Building a Sophomore Success System

The University of South Carolina (USC) has created a coordinated Carolina Experience framework that explicitly extends support beyond the first year. Within that framework, the university's Sophomore Success hub offers events, planning tools, and a month-by-month Second Year Success Road Map that walks students through key milestones, from meeting with academic advisers to exploring study abroad, internships, and leadership roles. The office also curates resources for students moving to off-campus housing, recognizing that the transition can weaken a sense of belonging.

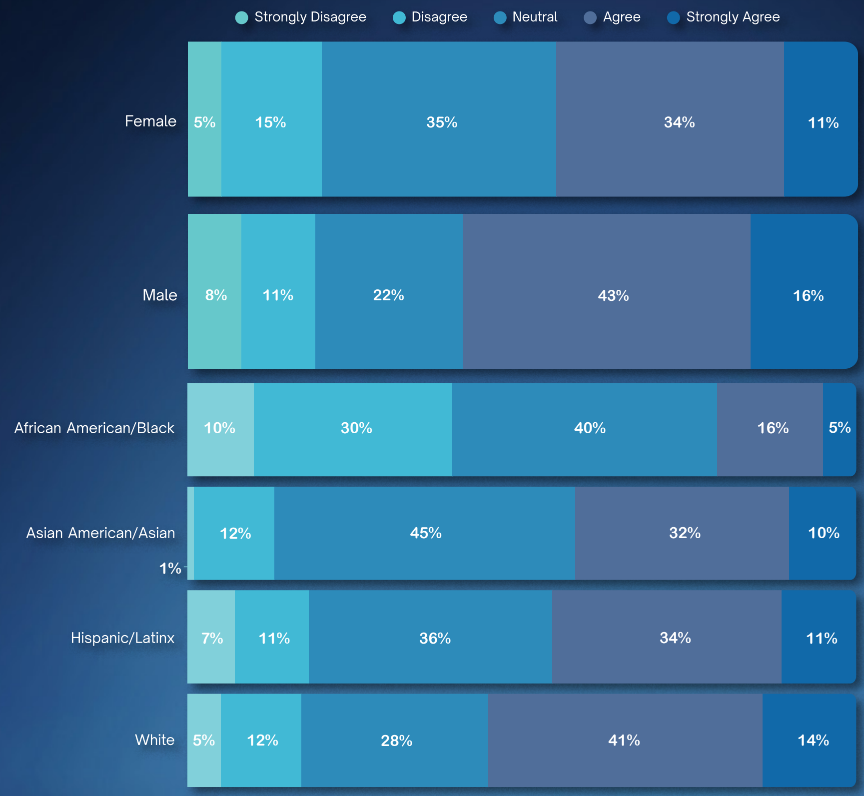
Living-learning communities also play a role. USC's faculty-led living-learning communities house students with shared academic or personal interests on the same floors and connect them with everyday activities and mentoring, an approach the institution uses across all class years. For sophomores, that model can re-create some of the structured engagement that often dissipates after the first year.

Nationally, living-learning communities and other high-impact practices such as undergraduate research, service learning, and internships have been associated with stronger engagement and persistence, particularly for students from historically underserved backgrounds. USC deliberately steers second-year students toward those opportunities, rather than assuming they will find them on their own, part of its retention strategy.

At the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), Student Retention and Success (SRS) offices coordinate a suite of initiatives aimed at helping students thrive at the school through strengths-based focused programming. Within that portfolio, a 2nd Year Experience (2YE) program explicitly targets sophomores and other upper-division students.

The program exposes second-year and upper-class students—with an emphasis on first-generation students—to high-impact practice opportunities that can be tailored to their goals, including career readiness experiences and community-building activities designed to build purpose and networks. The 2Excel program, a year-long retention and support initiative, also for second-year and upper-division students, layers on holistic personal, academic, and professional development through workshops, coaching, and peer communities.

By treating the second year as a key inflection point for identity formation and career planning, rather than merely a bridge between general education and upper-division coursework, UCSD aims to keep students on track academically and emotionally connected.



From Isolated Efforts To Intentional Design

Experts say that tackling the sophomore slump effectively requires an intentional shift in how campuses structure the undergraduate journey.

An analysis from Ruffalo Noel Levitz, a student success and enrollment consulting firm, argues that “campus retention efforts, historically, don’t focus on second-year students as much as they do first-year students,” even though maximizing persistence between the first and second years is increasingly essential in a shrinking enrollment environment.

Common elements across successful efforts include:

- Second-year seminars and courses that help students clarify academic pathways, explore majors, and connect coursework to careers. National survey data show credit-bearing sophomore seminars remain relatively rare but can serve as anchor points for reflection and planning.
- Living-learning communities and residential models that engage sophomores through shared interest or academic themes, mitigating the isolation that can come with moving off campus.
- Targeted advising and early-alert systems that extend predictive analytics and case management into the second year instead of focusing solely on first-year risk.

The goal is not to recreate the intensity of the first-year experience but to match the evolving needs of those who are choosing majors, weighing finances, and imagining life after graduation.

As national second-year persistence and retention rates gradually recover, the data suggest that institutions can no longer afford to treat the sophomore slump as inevitable. Instead, campuses like USC and UCSD are demonstrating that intentional efforts, backed by real-time data and a focus on belonging, can turn a vulnerable year into a powerful point of momentum. ●

Faculty Belonging Is the Hidden Engine of Student Retention

By Misty Evans

When mentors stay, students stay. On many campuses, leaders say they can feel the difference between a department where faculty are energized and one where office doors remain shut, and hallway conversations are rare. Research increasingly backs up that intuition: When faculty feel respected, supported, and connected to colleagues, students are more likely to be engaged, persist, and graduate.

Researchers have long linked student success to the quality of their interactions with faculty. Studies using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) have found that frequent, meaningful student-faculty interaction is associated with higher satisfaction and stronger odds that students stay enrolled. In one recent study of Generation Z students at a public land-grant institution, higher levels of faculty interaction predicted both overall student satisfaction and first-year retention.

Emerging evidence suggests a direct connection between faculty morale and student outcomes. One review of faculty performance and morale in the Human Kinetics Journals found that job satisfaction and morale influence teaching quality and student learning, which in turn shape program quality and institutional success. Other scholars argued that faculty satisfaction and student outcomes are strongly related, particularly important in online and blended environments where instructor engagement can make or break the student experience, according to the Online Learning Consortium.

Together, these findings point to a simple but powerful idea: Institutions that want to improve student retention cannot ignore the working conditions, culture, and well-being of the people doing the teaching.

Faculty Satisfaction, Retention, and Student Success

Several empirical studies have begun to quantify the connection between faculty satisfaction and student persistence. In a study of community college faculty on Taylor & Francis Online, researcher Linda Miller found that higher levels of perceived decision-making power and influence were significantly associated with faculty satisfaction, and that greater faculty satisfaction was correlated with higher student retention rates.

Other research has focused on how faculty care of and relationships with students affect engagement. A 2022 study in the International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education found that perceived faculty caring significantly predicted students' academic engagement and motivation for lifelong learning. Qualitative work has reached similar conclusions: In interviews with undergraduates across disciplines, students described positive relationships with faculty as central to their sense of belonging and academic confidence.

These studies do not prove that any single faculty development initiative will guarantee higher graduation rates. But they add to a growing consensus: When faculty feel empowered to teach well and connect meaningfully with students, those students are more likely to stay.

Burnout, Workload, and the Risk of Losing Mentors

The inverse is also true. When faculty feel overwhelmed, isolated, or burned out, they are more likely to leave their institution—and sometimes the profession altogether.

Recent work in Frontiers in Education has documented how job demands and stress predict burnout and turnover intentions among higher education professionals. In a 2023 case study of university teacher educators in Finland, researchers found that increased stress during the COVID-19 pandemic and higher intention to leave teaching both significantly predicted risk of burnout. A related line of research also showed that teaching–research conflict contributes to burnout

Burnout is rarely caused by a single factor. Studies drawing on the job demands–resources framework point to heavy workloads, administrative burden and lack of control as key drivers, while social support and school connectedness can buffer against stress. When those protective factors are missing, faculty can feel both exhausted and alone—a combination that significantly increases the likelihood of attrition.

The consequences ripple outward. Departments with high turnover lose not only course coverage and research capacity, but also advising relationships and informal mentoring networks that are difficult to replace. For students, the departure of a trusted mentor can disrupt a carefully built sense of belonging.

Columbia's Framework for Faculty Belonging

Some institutions are responding by treating faculty belonging as a strategic priority rather than an afterthought.

At Columbia University, the Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Advancement explicitly frames its mission around "inclusive excellence," with a focus on faculty development and community-building initiatives that allow current and future faculty to thrive. The office works with school leaders to evaluate and strengthen inclusion and belonging initiatives across the university.

Columbia's Center for Teaching and Learning, working with the Office of the Provost, has produced a Guide for Inclusive Teaching teaches faculty how to pass those principals on in their classrooms. The guide distills research-based principles for inclusive classrooms and offers strategies faculty can implement immediately. It encourages instructors to create environments where all students feel they matter, to structure participation so more voices are heard and to clarify expectations that support both student belonging and instructor confidence.

Beyond the classroom, the Provost's office has developed best-practice guides for mentoring and departmental climate. Its Guide to Best Practices in Faculty Mentoring provides departments with a "roadmap" for building employee mentoring programs tailored to local needs, while a companion document on faculty retention and climate emphasizes transparent communication, shared norms and mechanisms for addressing conflict. Together, these resources signal that faculty thriving is a core part of Columbia's academic strategy, not just an HR concern.

Peer Mentoring as a Retention Strategy

For many campuses, mid-career faculty present a particular retention challenge. Associate professors may feel squeezed between heavy service obligations, high teaching loads and pressure to maintain research productivity, all while informal mentoring and recognition often shift to newer hires.

To address these pressures, some universities are experimenting with structured peer mentorship networks.

At New York University, the Mid-Career Faculty Initiative provides tenured associate professors with a blend of workshops, writing salons and peer-mentoring opportunities focused on promotion to full professor. The program aims to help mid-career faculty "leverage their experience" across research, teaching and service while offering peer-to-peer support.

The University of Texas at San Antonio's Mid-Career Faculty Mentoring Program similarly groups tenured faculty into mentoring pods that pair a senior mentor with several mid-career colleagues. The pods meet in a series of sessions that combine structured content with space for participants to discuss promotion pathways, workload choices, and strategies for balancing competing demands.

Medical schools and health sciences campuses have also invested in peer-mentoring models. The University of Arizona's LIFT (Leading and Inspiring Faculty Trajectories) program is an early- and mid-career peer mentoring initiative in academic medicine designed to supplement departmental mentoring and connect faculty with tools and networks needed to thrive. A 2022 article in Academic Medicine notes that robust mid-career mentoring programs can support faculty growth and engagement and, in turn, improve the diversity of leadership pipelines.

These networks do more than offer occasional advice. They create communities where faculty can share strategies, normalize challenges, and avoid the sense of isolation that often precedes burnout and departure.

Auditing Workload to Keep Mentors in Place

Alongside mentoring, institutions are beginning to confront workload, one of the most persistent sources of faculty stress.

National analyses show that invisible labor, such as advising, committee work, and diversity efforts, is often distributed unevenly, with women and faculty of color carrying a disproportionate share. The Equity-Minded Faculty Workload and Rewards Project, a National Science Foundation ADVANCE-funded initiative led by higher education scholar KerryAnn O'Meara and colleagues, worked with 51 departments to make workload more transparent and equitable.

In a randomized trial, departments that implemented workload dashboards, explicit norms, and regular conversations about service reported greater perceptions of workload equity and higher faculty satisfaction. Those departments used faculty work-activity dashboards to visualize teaching, research, and service responsibilities, then adjusted assignments to reduce disparities.

Building on that work, some campuses are now conducting formal workload audits. At Lehigh University, an initiative on equitable faculty workloads asks departments to complete a workload audit, use dashboards to see who is doing which kinds of work, and then co-create internal workload plans and accountability mechanisms. The goal is not to micromanage faculty time, but to ensure that the culture does not inadvertently push certain groups toward burnout.

These approaches matter because they target the structural conditions that drive attrition. When faculty can see that expectations for teaching, research, and service are transparent and fairly distributed, they are more likely to view their institution as a place where they can build a long-term career.

Designing Cultures Where Mentors Can Thrive

Taken together, the research and institutional examples suggest several lessons for leaders who want to strengthen both faculty and student retention.

Treat faculty belonging as a measurable outcome. Climate surveys, focus groups, and structured feedback tools—such as educator well-being questionnaires that assess school connectedness and perceived support can help departments identify patterns of stress and isolation before they lead to exits.

Invest in mentoring across career stages. Mid-career faculty often shoulder heavy service loads while receiving less formal support. Peer mentoring networks, cross-department cohorts, and structured programs like those at NYU, UTSA, and Arizona offer models that can be adapted to different institutional contexts.

Make workload visible and adjustable. Workload dashboards, equity audits, and explicit departmental norms help ensure that advising, committee work, and student support do not depend on a small group of overextended faculty.

Connect the dots to student success. Student-engagement surveys and institutional data show that when faculty are supported in building strong relationships with students through reasonable workloads, collegial support, and a sense of belonging, students are more likely to stay enrolled and complete their degrees.

For institutions under pressure to improve graduation rates, it can be tempting to focus exclusively on student-facing programs such as first-year seminars, advising centers, or learning communities. Those investments matter. But the research is increasingly clear that a parallel strategy is just as important: building workplaces where faculty can imagine themselves staying, growing, and mentoring the next generation.

In other words, students stay when mentors stay, and mentors stay when the culture, workload, and leadership of their departments make it possible for them to thrive. ●

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FACULTY EXODUS IS REAL. HERE'S HOW TO FIX IT.

BY ERIK CLIBURN

Faculty turnover is testing colleges' ability to deliver on their missions. Recent reporting and data point to a common trio of drivers: non-competitive pay, thin institutional support, especially for heavy teaching roles, and a fraying sense of belonging.

Case studies from Loyola University New Orleans and Iowa's public universities, along with new findings from academic medicine, illustrate both the scope of the problem and a path forward.

Pay and Support Gaps Undermine Continuity

At Loyola, faculty concerns about compensation and workload have reached a tipping point, according to The Maroon, the school's student newspaper. The publication reports that President Xavier Cole has identified pay and retention as priorities in a five-year plan and that faculty senate leaders have flagged salary gaps versus peer institutions—particularly in law and arts and sciences—as an urgent concern.

Faculty discussions also highlighted how sustained underinvestment can ripple across departments: departures increase teaching loads, reduce time for research, and make it harder to sustain a rigorous core curriculum.

In the nursing program, for example, a lack of competitive salaries has already contributed to losses of experienced educators. Non-tenure-track and part-time instructors, who carry substantial instructional loads, were described as having limited time and resources to pursue scholarship—an imbalance that fuels burnout and exit decisions.

The through line in Loyola's debate is continuity. When institutions can't compete on pay, or protect time for the scholarly work that underwrites strong teaching, they lose not only individual employees but also the institutional foundation, mentoring capacity, and course stability that students experience day to day.

Tenure's Erosion and Resignations Raise the Stakes

Iowa's public universities are experiencing a similar challenge. A Board of Regents report cited by the local Iowa newspaper, The Gazette, shows the number of tenured faculty across the University of Iowa, Iowa State, and the University of Northern Iowa has fallen to 2,333—its lowest in decades and down 21% since 1998.

At the same time, the Regents reported a record 186 resignations in the 2023 budget year, including 93 tenured or tenure-track departures. Legislative scrutiny has intensified pressure, with proposals to expand post-tenure review and restrict certain campus initiatives. That climate compounds recruiting challenges, especially when universities increasingly rely on non-tenure-track roles with less job security.

Even amid the pressure, the regents have articulated why tenure matters for quality and competitiveness.

"The goal of tenure is to ensure academic freedom to innovate, create and engage in explorations that advance knowledge," a statement from the Regents reads. "Iowa's public universities want faculty who create, innovate, push boundaries, and take risks in ways that result in progress across many different fields of study."

Those protections and the research and grant wins they allow for are difficult to maintain when experienced scholars are leaving faster than campuses can replace them.

Belonging Is A Powerful Predictor of Who Stays

Compensation and job security aren't the only levers colleges have. A research letter in JAMA Network Open analyzed responses from 15,915 faculty across 26 U.S. medical schools and found that those who felt dissatisfaction with department-level belonging were seven times more likely to leave within two years.

"People seek environments and

MEASURING FACULTY DISCONTENT

Across higher education, faculty, and staff discontent has reached a tipping point—and new national data show just how pervasive the problem has become.

According to the Viewfinder® National Campus Climate Data Center (NCCDC), which aggregate responses from more than 90,000 college employees nationwide, low pay, heavy workloads, and perceptions of unfair treatment are among the strongest predictors of dissatisfaction.

Nearly 61.6% of faculty and 63.4% of staff say they are underpaid for the work they do, while two-thirds of all campus employees report that pay disparities persist at their institutions.

In addition, almost half of tenured and tenure-track faculty (49%) say there are "too many expectations" of them—a rate significantly higher than that of staff or non-tenure-track faculty.

Faculty also report feeling overworked and undervalued. The data show that 59% of tenured or tenure-track professors believe their workload is too heavy, compared with 45% of non-tenure-track faculty. Meanwhile, only 38% of all respondents agree that their institution provides adequate funding for professional development.

The findings underscore that compensation isn't the only issue. Almost half of staff (45%) say their campus merit and promotion systems are unfair, and more than four in 10 tenured faculty believe that not all employees are held to the same professional standards.

These perceptions of inequity can erode morale, trust, and—ultimately—retention. The NCCDC team recommends that colleges conduct regular pay and workload assessments, ensure transparent promotion processes, and expand funding for professional growth. By addressing these systemic issues, institutions can begin rebuilding confidence and stability in the academic workforce.

Explore NCCDC findings here:

connections to people, places, and things where they feel a sense of belonging—a basic human need," Julie Kathleen Silver, MD, and her colleagues wrote. "Medical schools should design and implement programs that enhance belonging."

They define belonging as a feeling that an individual believes they are a valued and fundamental part of their surroundings. The pattern held across groups, with notable disparities for women and faculty from racially and ethnically minoritized backgrounds.

What Retention Looks Like in Practice

Taken together, these cases and data sets point to a playbook of best practices that universities can act on now:

- **Benchmark and fund competitive pay.** Tie compensation to clear peer sets and cost-of-living realities. Prioritize equity adjustments in departments with the widest gaps. Make salary progress visible to rebuild trust.
- **Rebalance workloads and protect time for scholarship.** Cap course loads to sustainable levels, fund course releases tied to research or program development, and ensure instructors with heavy teaching portfolios have pathways to professional development and growth.
- **Invest in academic freedom and employment security.** Reaffirm tenure's role in innovation and student learning; where non-tenure-track roles are essential, expand multi-year appointments and transparent promotion ladders to reduce turnover.
- **Build belonging at the department level.** Train chairs on inclusive leadership and recognition, establish mentoring networks, and use pulse surveys to identify and address climate issues—especially for women and faculty from underrepresented groups. As the JAMA Network Open analysis shows, relatively modest improvements in belonging can have outsized retention effects.
- **Strengthen pipelines and continuity.** When departures occur, budget for overlap hires and internal interim coverage to protect core courses and advising. Communicate timelines and plans so students and remaining faculty aren't left guessing.

Ultimately, retention is a test of institutional priorities. The reporting from Loyola shows how compensation and support decisions echo through classrooms and labs; the Iowa data quantifies the systemic cost when tenure erodes and resignations mount; and the medical-school research underscores that culture—specifically, whether people feel they belong—can make or break a career decision.

The solution is a sustained alignment of pay, policy, and climate with the values universities claim exist: fostering discovery, delivering excellent teaching, and serving the public good. ●


RUTGERS School of Nursing
Joset Brown PhD, MSN, RN

♥ ♥ ♥ ♥

Bringing Care Home

Neighborhood Nursing Programs Are Improving Community Health

By Erik Cliburn

In Alabama and Maryland, two major universities are transforming how nursing education meets public health through a simple concept: bring health care to where people live. Known as Neighborhood Nursing, these programs embed nursing students directly in local communities—an effort that fuses classroom learning with hands-on service while tackling some of the nation's health disparities.

Alabama: A Movement Rooted in Community

The University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) College of Nursing has launched Neighborhood Nursing, a sweeping multi-agency initiative, as a way to break down barriers to public health and improve life expectancy across North Alabama.

"Neighborhood Nursing is a transformative movement and a deeply rooted community-driven model that brings care, education, and policy insight directly to the people who need it most," said Azita Amiri, associate dean for research and professor at UAH. "It's about advancing primary prevention by meeting people where they live, work and play, while training the next generation of health care leaders to do the same."

The effort could hardly come at a more critical time. Alabama ranks among the lowest in national health indicators—third worst in longevity, second worst in veteran suicide and infant outcomes, and last in maternal health.

"At UAH, we see nursing education as inseparable from community impact," said Karen Frith, dean of the College of Nursing. "The Neighborhood Nursing program embodies our commitment to evidence-based care, collaboration and real-world learning that goes beyond the classroom."

Unveiled during the SHINE 2025 Symposium for Health Innovation and Neighborhood Engagement, the program serves as both a training platform for students and a regional health network aimed at long-term change.

The College of Nursing will act as the central hub, providing clinical supervision, data collection, and research support. Already, the program has drawn significant interest—including a $50,000 seed donation from an anonymous alum.

"We're incredibly encouraged by the early momentum behind this initiative," said Dr. Helen Lien, senior development officer for the College of

UAH’s Neighborhood Nursing initiative is built around several interconnected components:

- **Health screening events in underserved areas such as Triana, the Huntsville Housing Authority, and the Bob Harrison Wellness and Advocacy Center, with support from partners including Huntsville Hospital, the Clearview Cancer Institute, and the VA Birmingham Mobile Unit.**
- **Home visits for homebound individuals and families—especially mothers and infants—through the Nurse-Family Partnership in Jackson, Marshall, and DeKalb counties.**
- **The SHINE Symposium and Podcast, designed to connect community advocates, researchers, and clinicians in sharing solutions that advance health equity.**
- **“Let’s Pretend Hospital,” a long-running educational program that introduces first graders to health care environments in positive, playful ways.**
- **An external advisory board of health experts, policymakers, and community representatives who help steer the initiative’s goals and outcomes.**

Nursing. “This gift, and the willingness of so many to get involved, speaks to a shared belief in the power of community-based care and the impact we can make together.”

The project’s rollout will begin in Madison County in early 2026, followed by expansion into surrounding and northern Alabama counties through 2029. In the long term, UAH hopes to scale the model statewide, combining education, workforce development, research, and outreach to build a more resilient health care ecosystem.

Maryland: A Block-by-Block Revolution

A similar transformation is unfolding in Baltimore, where Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing (JHSON) has joined forces with Morgan State University, Coppin State University, and the University of Maryland to launch its own Neighborhood Nursing initiative. The goal is to connect every city resident with a nurse and community health worker team to provide ongoing, personalized support.

Inspired by Costa Rica’s “all in” primary care system, the program targets neighborhoods where disparities persist despite widespread insurance coverage—94% of Baltimore residents are insured, yet gaps in maternal health, mental health, and chronic disease outcomes remain.

“I think of what we’re building as like pipes in a water system,” Sarah Szanton, PhD, RN, FAAN, dean of JHSON, said on NPR’s Tradeoffs podcast. “Where there’s a resource that’s flowing to every household and that connects them to each other.”

Teams of registered nurses and health workers are now conducting door-to-door visits in pilot neighborhoods such as Johnston Square/Oliver and Sandtown-Winchester. They meet residents in homes, churches, barbershops, schools, libraries, and senior centers—wherever people feel most comfortable.

Led by Lisa Stambolis, senior project manager for JHSON’s Institute for Policy Solutions, the effort aims to ensure that every person, regardless of age or health status, has access to preventive care and health guidance. Residents can also opt into telehealth connections and ongoing check-ins tailored to their needs.

Neighborhood Nursing expects to improve major health indicators by decreasing infant mortality and premature deaths, increasing vaccination rates, and reducing anxiety and depression. It’s a bold attempt to move from reactive to proactive health care—one built on trust, continuity, and community presence.

> **“This gift, and the willingness of so many to get involved, speaks to a shared belief in the power of community-based care and the impact we can make together.”**
>
> **Dr. Helen Lien**

Evidence supports this approach. A five-year evaluation by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services found that connecting patients to community-based social and health supports led to a 3% reduction in Medicaid costs and a 4% reduction in Medicare expenditures, alongside measurable gains in care quality.

As these Neighborhood Nursing initiatives grow, they point toward a reimagined future of health care—one where communities are not peripheral to medicine, but its foundation. ●

University Alliances Aim to Solve Regional Nursing Shortages

By Erik Cliburn

As the nationwide nursing shortage continues to strain hospitals and health systems, universities are stepping up with innovative partnerships to expand educational access and train the next generation of nurses.

Recent collaborations between Emory University and Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech), as well as between University of New Mexico (UNM) and Navajo Technical University (NTU), illustrate how institutions are joining forces to build sustainable pipelines that reflect the needs of their local communities.

Expanding the Pipeline in Georgia

In metro Atlanta, Emory University's Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing and Georgia Tech have launched a partnership designed to address Georgia's growing nursing workforce needs. The agreement creates a direct pathway for Georgia Tech graduates to enroll in Emory's Master of Nursing (MN) program, an accelerated entry-to-practice degree for students with bachelor's degrees in other disciplines.

The 15-month MN program prepares students to sit for the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) and begin practicing as registered nurses. For Emory, this continues a series of strategic collaborations aimed at cultivating high-caliber nursing professionals who are both academically prepared and community-minded.

"Partnering with Georgia Tech represents another exciting step forward for nursing education," said Linda McCauley, dean of the School of Nursing. "Together, we're expanding opportunities for future nurses and ensuring that our communities and health systems have the skilled professionals they need to thrive."

The five-year partnership marks Emory's fourth collaboration with a local college, establishing similar pathways with Spelman College, Agnes Scott College, and Oglethorpe University. Collectively, these programs seek to broaden the pool of nursing students by reaching undergraduates from diverse academic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Georgia Tech's Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and Student Success, Steven Girardot called the initiative a reflection of both institutions' shared values.

"We are excited to participate in a program that will develop future leaders in nursing," Girardot said. "This direct pathway opens doors for our graduates to launch meaningful careers in nursing, living out our motto of 'Progress and Service' in the most impactful way."

With Georgia's health care systems facing increasing demand for qualified nurses—in urban and rural regions alike—partnerships like this one represent a vital investment in long-term workforce sustainability.

Building Cultural and Educational Bridges in New Mexico

More than 1,300 miles west, another partnership is taking shape with a deep local focus. The UNM College of Nursing has joined with Navajo Technical University (NTU) to strengthen nursing education in rural and tribal communities across the state.

Under a new agreement, UNM will work with NTU over the next year to support the development of its nursing program—sharing faculty expertise, curriculum design, and educational technology. The initiative also emphasizes reciprocal learning grounded in Diné (Navajo) cultural philosophy and respect for Indigenous knowledge.

"This collaboration reflects our shared respect for community and culture," said Rosario Medina, PhD, dean of the UNM College of Nursing. "It's about listening and building a foundation for nursing education that honors both."

NTU, located in Crownpoint, New Mexico, was the first university established on the Navajo Nation and integrates the principles of Nitsáhákees (thinking), Nahátá

(planning), Īína (implementing), and Siihasin (reflection) into its educational model. Through this partnership, UNM faculty and staff will have opportunities to take Diné language and cultural courses, ensuring that both institutions benefit from the exchange.

"We've been working with UNM on our RN program," said Michelle Kahn John, PhD, NTU's nursing program advisor. "Their experienced faculty will help guide and support us. This collaboration is grounded in the Diné philosophy, and NTU will also offer cross-cultural training. UNM faculty and staff will be able to take Diné language classes, helping both schools learn from each other."

The partnership emerged from meetings held at NTU's Crownpoint campus, where leaders discussed shared goals and the challenges facing rural nursing education—including limited clinical opportunities and geographic barriers to program growth. UNM's support will help NTU strengthen its registered nursing curriculum, train new faculty, and expand access to advanced degree pathways for students who want to remain close to their communities.

Long-term, the two universities envision a seamless academic progression from NTU's associate degree program to bachelor's, master's, and eventually doctoral programs at UNM.

"Together, the UNM College of Nursing and NTU are working toward a shared vision: a more connected pathway for nursing students to advance their education while staying close to home and community," the institutions said in a joint statement.

A Broader National Imperative

Both partnerships underscore a growing trend in higher education: collaborative, locally responsive solutions to health care workforce shortages. Rather than relying solely on recruitment from outside their region, universities are investing in models that elevate community talent and foster a sense of service and belonging.

In Georgia, that means opening new doors for technically trained students to enter nursing with a foundation in innovation and applied science. In New Mexico, it's about weaving cultural competency and community engagement into every layer of nursing education.

As the health care landscape continues to evolve, these efforts demonstrate how universities can work across institutional and cultural boundaries to meet an urgent public need—preparing nurses who not only fill critical roles but also understand the communities they serve. ●

Searching in Academic Nursing: Challenges and Opportunities

By Andriel Dees

To say that recruitment and retention of employees in higher education this year was a roller coaster is likely an understatement. So many shifts in the higher education landscape created much uncertainty in the job market this year at all levels. With the recent update from the Department of Education on what is being deemed as professional graduate degrees, the nursing profession in particular has taken a direct hit.

As we enter 2026, here are some trends to consider for nursing schools looking for potential candidates to fill their open positions.

2025 Challenges

This year began with some startling changes in nursing education. Significant cuts in grant funding created a forced correction in higher education with research positions being halted or eliminated altogether. Many states already managing budget constraints have had to make difficult decisions on how to right-size public funding of higher education overall.

In addition to these changes, shifts in leadership occurred for a variety of reasons leaving many institutions looking at filling top positions with interim hires hoping that the constant sea of change might slow down later in the year and into 2026.

For academic nursing, the continuous shortage of nursing faculty has created a need for nursing schools and programs to consider innovative options.

While the national need for registered nurses continues to grow, a lack of qualified nursing educators is forcing colleges and universities to use creative strategies to attract and recruit nursing faculty. The good news is that according to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing's (AACN) Annual Faculty Vacancy Report, in 2025, the overall vacancy rate was 7.2%, a significant decrease from the 2024 rate of 7.9%.

The reasons for the faculty shortage have remained the same for the past two decades. According to the AACN report, the main issues continue to be:

- Noncompetitive salaries
- Finding faculty with the necessary teaching experience
- Finding faculty with the right specialty
- Generally, nursing school faculty salaries have historically been difficult to keep on par within various disciplines.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the median salary for advanced practicing registered nurses is $129,480. By contrast, AACN reported in March 2023 that the median salary for a master's-prepared professor in schools of nursing is $93,958.

Academic Nursing Preparation

In many nursing programs, there has been a plethora of adjunct faculty that teach in both clinical positions and in the classroom. The current recommendations at the federal level to restructure what are deemed to be professional degrees, threaten the potential for many nurses currently in the profession that may not be able to afford the opportunity to continue their education toward a masters or doctoral degree.

Nursing Specialties Are Growing

There continue to be very limited numbers of job candidates within certain nursing specialties and even fewer that are interested in pursuing academic nursing. Nevertheless, it is essential that we train in these specialty disciplines because the market is moving in that direction. The greatest growth area is in Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs) including Nurse Practitioners (NPs) and Nurse Anesthetists (CRNAs). Shortages are driven by an aging population, physician shortages, and increasingly complex health care needs.

Specialized areas such as informatics, long-term care, and critical care are seeing particularly high demand to fill positions.

So how can nursing programs find opportunities for recruiting and retaining more nurses? Three options include:

- Grow your own professorships
- Invest in nursing career centers
- Enhance certain searches using executive search firms

Grow Your Own Professorships

Growing your own professorship programs has been largely successful in institutions that have a natural pipeline. Recruiting promising nursing candidates early in their career creates a culture of mentoring, and invest in faculty development.

One model is the Association of College and University Educator's (ACUE) Nursing Pathway in Effective Teaching Certification. ACUE has a strong reputation for developing research-based professional development competencies and curriculum to improve teaching practices and boost student success.

Nursing Career Centers

Our executive search firm has found success in reaching out and creating strong relationships with graduate nursing program career centers. Many of the deans and directors of these centers are always eager to find great opportunities for their students, thus creating a pipeline of opportunity. Career centers have the ability to plant the seed early, particularly with their undergraduate students to consider becoming the next generation of nursing faculty.

Enhancing Searches Using Executive Search Firms

In the area of executive search, some firms have the ability to hone in on finding leaders as well as specialties within disciplines, including nursing. They create specialty practices, follow trends in the labor market, and build relationships within the field that are not possible for many higher education institutions to invest in and create.

Overall, while there may be continued challenges and headwinds, the nursing profession continues to be committed to creating creative ways to recruit the next generation of nursing faculty. ●

Andriel Dees, JD, is the Vice President of Executive Search for Greenwood Asher & Associates

PROPOSED RECLASSIFICATION OF NURSING DEGREE COULD HAVE DIRE CONSEQUENCES

By Erik Cliburn

A sweeping regulatory proposal from the Trump administration is drawing sharp criticism from nursing groups and higher education leaders, warning that a narrow federal definition of "professional degree" would effectively lock graduate nursing students out of higher federal borrowing limits. The change, authorized under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), would halve the amount nursing students can borrow for master's, doctoral, and advanced practice programs beginning in 2026.

Under the administration's plan, only programs meeting the Department of Education's (ED) new professional degree criteria would qualify for $50,000 in annual federal loans and a $200,000 lifetime cap. Nursing degrees do not appear on that list.

Instead, graduate nursing students, including those preparing to become nurse practitioners (NPs), nurse anesthetists, and nursing faculty, would be limited to $20,500 in loans per year and $100,000 total.

For a field already struggling with workforce shortages, advocates say the implications would be severe.

National Nurses United (NNU), the country's largest union of registered nurses, blasted the proposal as "an attack on the nursing profession." In a statement, the union argued the change would "exclude graduate nursing students from professional loans, which have higher limits than those for other graduate students," adding that "this is an insult to nurses, the most trusted profession in the nation."

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) echoed those concerns. In its press release, the organization said it is "deeply concerned" that ED's proposed definition "excludes nursing and significantly limits student loan access," despite the "complexity, rigor, and necessity of post-baccalaureate nursing education." AACN warned that the impact on the already-strained pipeline would be devastating.

The administration rejected the premise that nurses are being devalued. In a November 2024 fact sheet, ED said, "The definition of a 'professional degree' is an internal definition used by the Department to distinguish among programs that qualify for higher loan limits, not a value judgment about the importance of programs." It further asserted that "95% of nursing students borrow below the annual loan limit and therefore are not affected by the new caps."

But many experts dispute the department's claims. Graduate nursing programs, particularly nurse practitioner and nurse anesthetist tracks, are often among the most expensive in public health education. Limiting access to federal loans, they say, would push students toward high-interest private debt or out of the pipeline entirely.

The ripple effects could reach far beyond individual students. Nursing schools already struggle to hire faculty, most of whom must hold graduate degrees. Data from AACN's 2024–2025 annual survey shows the average age of a nursing professor to be 60.1 years old—with approaching retirement expected to exacerbate the issue. Rural and underserved communities, which rely heavily on NPs for primary care, could be hit hardest.

"If the Trump administration truly wanted to support nurses, it would be working to improve working conditions, expand education opportunities, and ensure patients can get health care," the NNU wrote. "Instead, this administration is stripping VA nurses of their union rights, making education harder to access, and cutting health care for those who need it most."

NNU linked the rule to what it calls a "manufactured nurse retention crisis"—shortages created by hospitals cutting staff to maximize profits, leading to burnout and unsafe conditions for the nurses who remain—arguing that restricting access to advanced education "will only further contribute to forces driving nurses away from the bedside."

THE UNION ARGUED THE CHANGE WOULD "EXCLUDE GRADUATE NURSING STUDENTS FROM PROFESSIONAL LOANS, WHICH HAVE HIGHER LIMITS THAN THOSE FOR OTHER GRADUATE STUDENTS," ADDING THAT "THIS IS AN INSULT TO NURSES, THE MOST TRUSTED PROFESSION IN THE NATION."

ED has emphasized that the rule is not final. A Notice of Proposed Rulemaking is expected within weeks, after which the public will have an opportunity to submit comments.

"It feels like a miscommunication," American Nurses Association (ANA) president Jennifer Mensik Kennedy told CBS News, adding, "we hope the Department of Education changes the proposed language before the rule comes out for public comment." To date, more than 230,000 people have signed ANA's petition to add nursing back to ED's list of professional degrees.

Whether the administration will reconsider remains an open question. For the nation's largest group of health care professionals, the answer could shape the future of an already strained workforce. ●

Nursing Education Enters a New Era With Tech-Driven Overhaul

By Misty Evans

Driven by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing's (AACN) 2021 Essentials: Core Competencies for Professional Nursing Education, nursing programs are moving away from time-based models toward competency-based education (CBE), where students progress based on what they actually do in practice. At the same time, rapid advances in artificial intelligence and virtual reality are reshaping how those competencies are taught and assessed.

For deans and faculty, that shift is no longer theoretical. It is starting to show up in line items for virtual reality (VR) headsets, AI-enabled simulation platforms, and faculty development workshops, as well as in questions from university leaders who want to know how these investments will position their nursing programs in a competitive market.

CBE as the New Baseline

AACN defines competency-based education as "a system of instruction, assessment, feedback, self-reflection, and academic reporting" organized around what students can demonstrate: knowledge, skills, attitudes, and professional behaviors, rather than how many hours they are in class. The revised Essentials framework outlines 10 domains and explicit competencies that are expected across the trajectory of nursing education, from baccalaureate through advanced practice.

The goal is to close a growing gap between academic success and practice readiness. In one summary of the Essentials, AACN's shift is described as moving from a "knowing" paradigm to a "doing" paradigm that emphasizes measurable, real-world performance.

The National League for Nursing has also issued a vision statement encouraging schools to integrate CBE to ensure graduates have the ability to know, and also to do.

The outcome approach has turned simulation, informatics, and assessment technologies from nice-to-have features into core infrastructure for meeting national standards.

> The goal is to close a growing gap between academic success and practice readiness.

VR and Simulation

Virtual reality has quickly become one of the most visible technologies during this transition. A growing body of research suggests VR simulation can equal or surpass traditional teaching methods for specific clinical skills and knowledge outcomes.

A 2023 systematic review in BMC Medical Education found that, compared with conventional instruction, VR significantly improved nursing students' theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and learning satisfaction, even if gains in critical thinking were less pronounced. Another study of undergraduate nursing students reported that VR-based teaching significantly improved infection control knowledge and self-efficacy compared with standard teaching approaches.

Immersive VR has also been shown to perform as well as, or better than, clinical placements in some contexts. At George Mason University, a randomized study of students learning acute pediatric care found that those who trained in immersive VR performed better overall than peers trained in inpatient clinical settings.

For competency-based models, those findings matter because VR can be tightly mapped to specific AACN Essentials domains and competencies, from clinical judgment to communication and patient safety, and repeated until mastery is demonstrated. AACN and partner organizations highlight VR and other simulation modalities as key tools for building and assessing competencies over time.

Recent work also explores how integrating AI into virtual simulations can further personalize and standardize practice. A 2024 study of nurse practitioner students reported that VR simulations enhanced with AI-driven virtual patients and feedback supported clinical reasoning and communication skills, with activities deliberately aligned to competency frameworks.

AI in Classrooms and Clinics

Beyond simulation, AI tools are increasingly appearing across nursing curricula, from didactic courses to clinical learning.

A 2025 study in BMC Medical Education examined nursing students' use of text-based generative AI tools, including ChatGPT, Bard, and Bing AI. Students reported using these systems to clarify complex concepts, generate practice questions, and prepare for assessments, while also voicing concerns about accuracy, ethics, and academic integrity.

In clinical education, an emerging body of work examines AI systems that support decision-making and provide feedback, rather than replace instructors. A 2025 article on integrating AI into nursing clinical education describes AI applications ranging from predictive analytics to decision support and automated feedback on clinical documentation. The authors argue that AI has the potential to augment supervision and allow faculty to focus on higher-level mentoring if educators receive adequate training in AI literacy and ethics.

Across health professions, researchers are also exploring the role of large language models—AI systems trained on massive text datasets to understand and generate human-like text—in assessment. A 2024 study on medical Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs) found that large language models could rate communication skills and provide narrative feedback with a level of consistency that approached human assessors. While this work is still early, it points to possible applications in nursing communication, handoffs, and patient education competencies.

Video-Language Models and Automated Skills Assessment

Perhaps the most experimental frontier is the use of vision- or video-language models (VLMs) to evaluate procedural skills from video—a development with clear implications for competency-based nursing programs that rely heavily on skills checkoffs.

In 2025, researchers introduced a video-language model framework designed specifically for automated assessment of nursing skills. The system analyzes instructional or performance videos, decomposes procedures into fine-grained steps, and flags missing, incorrect, or out-of-order actions, then generates explainable feedback. The study suggests such tools could provide scalable, consistent formative feedback while reducing instructor workload, aligning closely with CBE's emphasis on repeated demonstration and transparent assessment criteria.

VR and AI-integrated simulation can offer predictable, standardized scenarios when clinical placements are limited.

More broadly, surveys of medical vision-language models describe rapid advances in tools that jointly analyze visual and textual data, from surgical videos to imaging studies, for training and evaluation. Although most of this work has not yet migrated into routine nursing education, it signals a near future in which simulation centers might pair skills labs with automated video review systems that provide immediate, competency-linked feedback.

Strategic Decisions and Faculty Development

For deans, program directors, and provosts, the convergence of CBE, AI, and VR is as much a strategic planning issue as a pedagogical one.

Implementing the AACN Essentials requires schools to revisit outcomes, assessment plans, and clinical partnerships, often under tight timelines and regulatory scrutiny. At the same time, building or upgrading simulation centers, licensing VR platforms, and piloting AI tools can require significant upfront investment in hardware, software, and support staff.

Faculty development is a recurring theme in the literature. AACN's Essentials Toolkit emphasizes resources to help faculty design competency-based curricula and assessments, and to integrate new technologies in ways aligned with the framework. Nursing education updates also highlight the need for ongoing training so faculty can confidently use simulation, data dashboards, and AI tools to support competency development rather than simply adding more content.

AI literacy is increasingly described as a core faculty and student competency in its own right. A 2025 guide for nurses on AI notes that frontline clinicians and educators need a baseline understanding of AI systems, data quality, bias, and regulation to participate meaningfully in tool selection, implementation, and evaluation.

Positioning for the Next Decade

As health systems adopt AI-enabled tools and advanced simulation, nursing programs that can demonstrate robust, competency-based preparation may gain an edge in attracting students, clinical partners, and employers.

VR and AI-integrated simulation can offer predictable, standardized scenarios when clinical placements are limited. AI-supported assessment can help programs document how students meet specific competencies, which matters for accreditation and accountability. Generative AI tools, when used responsibly, may personalize learning and help students practice clinical reasoning and communication in low-risk environments.

At the same time, researchers and educators caution that technology is not a substitute for human mentoring, reflective practice, or attention to equity and ethics. AACN's Essentials underscore that competencies such as compassionate care, communication, and understanding social determinants of health must remain central, even as informatics and health technologies become more prominent in curricula.

For academic leaders, the challenge is to align investments in AI and VR with competency-based frameworks, support faculty to redesign courses and assessments, and ensure that new tools ultimately produce graduates who are not only technically proficient but also prepared to navigate complex, technology-rich care environments.

In that sense, the shift from classroom to smart technology in nursing education is less about gadgets and more about redesigning learning around performance, feedback, and readiness, with AI, VR, and emerging assessment tools serving as powerful, if still evolving, means to that end. ●

OLE MISS LAUNCHES SPORTS PHARMACY EDUCATION PROGRAM

The University of Mississippi School of Pharmacy is expanding into new territory with the launch of a sports pharmacy education program designed to train pharmacists to meet the growing needs of athletes and fitness-focused individuals. The program, expected to debut in Spring 2026, builds on an elective course created by retired professor Marvin Wilson and is funded in part by a gift from Wilson and his wife Becky.

Wilson, a former pharmacology professor and associate dean, developed the course Drugs and Human Performance in 2014 to explore how medications and supplements affect physical, cognitive, and sexual performance. “Pharmacists a lot of times get these kinds of questions from young folks, parents or whoever it may be,” Wilson said. After retiring in 2017, he continued to pursue the subject, co-authoring Sports Pharmacy: Performance Enhancing Drugs and the Athlete, published by the American Pharmacists Association in 2019.

The upcoming certification program aims to formalize this emerging discipline, according to Donna Strum, dean of the School of Pharmacy. “Thanks to the Wilsons’ generosity and vision, we are poised to lead the field of sports pharmacy, equipping our students with specialized knowledge in medication management for athletes, performance-enhancing drugs, dietary supplements, and regulatory and practice considerations in sports pharmacy,” Strum said.

The program is being developed with guidance from experts in areas such as supplement use, injury recovery, and athlete wellness.

Shannon Singletary, executive associate athletics director and director of health and sports performance for Ole Miss Athletics, has collaborated on the project since the course’s inception. “Elite athletes represent a distinct patient population, facing unique physical demands that set them apart from sedentary or recreational athletes,” Singletary said. “With strict regulations governing the medications and supplements they can use, this emerging subspecialty in pharmacy is essential.”

Wilson believes the timing is ideal as public interest in fitness and supplements continues to rise. “Sports pharmacy is more than participating in anti-doping activities,” he said. “It also includes counseling on the safe and effective use of supplements and medication by athletes and those striving for increased fitness.”

The new initiative will further integrate the pharmacy school’s expertise with the university’s strong athletics culture, positioning Ole Miss as one of the few U.S. institutions advancing education in this rapidly growing field.

UVA Health Expands Dialysis Food Pharmacy Program to Combat Food Insecurity

The University of Virginia Health System (UVA Health) is expanding its Dialysis Food Pharmacy Program to all of its dialysis centers, ensuring that patients struggling with food insecurity have consistent access to healthy, kidney-friendly foods at no cost.

Food pharmacies began operating in July at UVA Health’s dialysis centers in Augusta, Culpeper, and Page counties, joining the original Charlottesville site where the program was first piloted in 2020. Each location partners with the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank to stock nutritious items suited for patients with kidney disease—including fruits, vegetables, proteins, grains, and spices—ordered by on-site dietitians. Patients receive the food during regular dialysis visits, along with nutrition education, recipes, and referrals to community resources.

“We’re leading the way with our focus on addressing food insecurity within UVA Health Dialysis, eliminating additional travel concerns for patients—and easing the ever-growing burden of choosing food, medicine, or transportation to dialysis,” said Lesley McPhatter, MS, RDN, CSR, clinical nutrition manager for UVA Health Lynchburg Dialysis.

Since the initiative began as a pilot program supported by a Blue Ridge Area Food Bank grant, it has distributed over 125,000 pounds of food to more than 450 patients through the end of 2024. The program’s goal is not only to improve patients’ nutritional status, but also to reduce the physical and financial stress that can accompany long-term dialysis care.

At the Augusta center, Janice Callender, RD, said the early response has been overwhelmingly positive. “Many of our patients have very limited resources and dialysis takes a toll on them in many ways,” she said. “With the food pharmacy, patients and their families are receiving food that should improve their nutritional status and overall health.”

That enthusiasm is shared across other centers. “My patients really appreciate the food pharmacy and the efforts put forth to keep it up and running,” said Skyler Barbour, RD, who works with patients at the Culpeper and Page locations. “We want there to be no barriers for participating and receiving nutritious, renal-friendly foods from our program.”

Funded entirely through donations since July 2023—raising more than $60,000 to date—the program continues to grow, reflecting UVA Health’s commitment to tackling food insecurity as a critical part of patient care.

Rethinking International Student Success:

A Holistic Model for Belonging and Retention

Beyond the Quadcast is a higher education podcast from Insight Into Academia, where hosts Misty Evans and DeMario Easley interview leaders, researchers, and changemakers tackling today's most pressing campus issues—from enrollment to leadership and innovation.

In the upcoming episode of Beyond the Quadcast, our hosts sit down with two leaders in international student success: Dr. Ling Gao LeBeau, Director of International Student Success at Syracuse University, and Steven W. Schaffling, Assistant Dean of Student Success for the College of Arts and Sciences and Maxwell School. Together, they share how Syracuse reimagined international student support—moving beyond compliance to build a relational, data-driven model that strengthens belonging, academic momentum, and long-term retention.


Dr. Ling Gao LeBeau

The conversation explores how Syracuse created one of the country's first dedicated international student success roles embedded directly inside academic advising, transforming what had been a transactional process into an integrated, holistic support system. LeBeau and Schaffling discuss why traditional silos fail international students, how early career development and peer mentoring can reshape first-year transitions, and the ways that AI tools—from resume review to mock interviews—are scaling support without sacrificing human connection.


Steven W. Schaffling

Throughout the episode, our guests offer candid insights on the communication platforms international students actually use, why not all 4.0 students make the best mentors, and how advising can function as teaching when institutions design for learning rather than logistics. They also spotlight low-budget strategies any campus can adopt immediately—approaches that have helped Syracuse achieve record retention rates and earn national recognition, including the NAFSA Senator Paul Simon Spotlight Award for Campus Internationalization and the NACADA Global Award for Outstanding Advising Program.

As Schaffling said, "You can't just articulate strategy. You have to build the operational systems that make it real."

Key Takeaways:

- **A holistic approach—integrating academic advising, career readiness, and community-building—dramatically improves international student retention.**
- **Dedicated international student success roles can break down silos and ensure consistent, high-impact support from day one.**
- **Early, structured career development is essential for global learners navigating unfamiliar systems and expectations.**
- **AI tools can scale advising capacity, freeing staff to focus on relationships rather than repetitive tasks.**
- **Peer mentoring and alumni engagement remain among the most effective—and affordable—interventions for belonging.**
- **Data, not anecdotes, must guide retention strategy.**

Stream this episode and more, and sign up to receive Insight's newsletter BEYOND the QUAD to be notified when new episodes are available.

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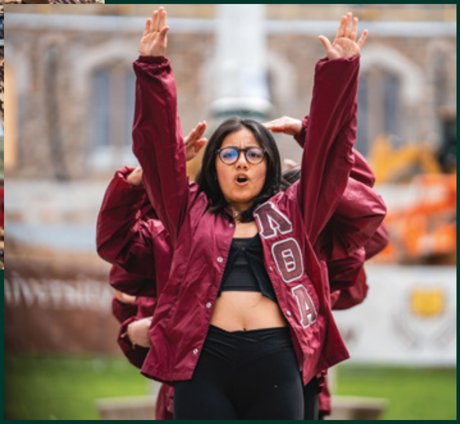

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