



2013 STUDENT RETENTION STUDY: **THE IMPACT OF PEER ACADEMIC COACHES (PACs) ON RETENTION**



HAWAI'I PACIFIC
UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH, ASSESSMENT &
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Retention rates for first-time, full-time freshmen (FTFTF) at HPU have ranged from 66% to 73% during the 2010 to 2013 time period. The study described in this report was initiated to investigate whether assignment of Peer-Academic-Coaches (PACs) to incoming FTFTF during the fall 2013 semester would have a positive impact on retention rate of the students in the study cohort as determined at the start of the fall 2014 semester. The PACs were tasked with making contact with the students each week and asking standard questions that are outlined in this report. The intent was for the PACs to provide support and guidance to the FTFTF in the study as compared to the control group of FTFTF who did not have PACs assigned to them. Students were randomly assigned to one of two groups two weeks after the start of the fall 2013 semester: a study group consisting of 271 students and a control group of 223 students. The data were analyzed after the last day to add/drop during the fall semester 2014. In the study group, data for 117 students was not included in the analysis due to the PAC's inability to contact the student, therefore, making data on these students non-evaluable. This left 154 students in the study group for evaluation.

Data analyzed after the add/drop period showed a retention rate of 76% for the study cohort who interacted with their PAC as compared to 67% for the control group who were not assigned a PAC. This represents a 9% increase in retention in the group of students assigned to and contacted by a PAC compared to students who were not assigned a PAC. The official HPU IPEDS retention rate for fall 2013 is 70%, and includes the entire student population (study and control students). It is interesting that the 117 students who were assigned PACs but did not make contact with them had a 70% retention rate. The study will be repeated during the 2014 – 2015 school year to verify these observations.



BACKGROUND:

As the Student Success Initiatives Report (2012) notes, nationally HPU has a comparatively low retention rate (though not necessarily lower than comparable schools in Hawai'i). HPU's rate for first time, full time students in fall 2010 was 73%; in fall 2009 and 2011, 66%. For decades HPU has been on a recruitment treadmill, continually trying to replace students lost from attrition through increased recruitment.

At the present time, there is a lack of comprehensive data available to HPU administrators which could be used to effectively address the problem. The present study seeks to correct that situation.

THE STUDY:

THE RETENTION INITIATIVE HAS TWO MAIN GOALS:

GOAL ONE: To collect comprehensive data that provides a fine-grained analysis of why some students stay at HPU after their freshman year and others do not. It moves beyond exit interviews to track the students as they progress through their first two semesters as a way of exploring the steps that lead students to make this key decision – a decision of major import to HPU.

GOAL TWO: In addition, the study explores: (a) HPU's effectiveness in collecting relevant data, especially on attendance a key indicator of retention. (b) HPU's ability to address attendance problems through brief conversations and advice to students not attending classes.

IF THE FIRST GOAL SEEKS TO COLLECT DATA, THE SECOND EXPLORES WHETHER THE UNIVERSITY CAN EFFECTIVELY UTILIZE SUCH DATA TO RAISE ITS RETENTION RATES. IT IS ONE THING TO UNDERSTAND A PROBLEM; IT IS ANOTHER TO TAKE EFFECTIVE ACTION.

WHY FOCUS ON ATTENDANCE AS A KEY VARIABLE?



Mississippi State University (MSU) started the Pathfinders program to enhance the academic performance of first-time, full-time freshmen and to increase retention of those students so they were able to progress onto their sophomore year. A number of assumptions were made in setting up the program that are substantiated by findings at MSU as well as by studies at other universities.

THESE ASSUMPTIONS ARE SUMMARIZED AS FOLLOWS:

- Students who come in as first-time, full-time freshmen and make poor grades during the first year have good qualifications based on ACT, SAT and high school grades.
- The difference between the qualifications of students continuing to the sophomore year compared to students who do not continue is small based on ACT, SAT and high school grades.
- The difference in university grades between the students who drop-out and those who continue to the sophomore year is significant.
- Freshmen who make poor grades, in general, get into academic difficulty approximately within the first 4-6 weeks of the freshman year.

See <http://www.pathfinders.org.msstate.edu/projectdescription.html> for more information.





HYPOTHESES:

1. HPU can effectively research its retention problem – not only collecting valid data on the decision-making process of students but also analyze and store it so it can be used by administrators to address the problem.
2. HPU can effectively monitor attendance in first time, full time freshman classes and, based on that monitoring, collect information on why some students are not regularly attending class. HPU also has the ability to advise students regarding the steps that need be taken to address this problem.
3. Based on the Mississippi State study (see above), attendance is a major indicator of academic difficulty and helping more students attend class will increase HPU's retention rate.

STUDY DESIGN:

1. The collection of ethnographic data on the weekly experiences of first time, full time students as they progress through their first two semesters. How are they succeeding? What problems are they having? Coaches, hired by the University, will work with students (at a ratio of 1 coach/10 students) to collect these ethnographic data.
2. Analysis of the above data on a “real time” basis: Administrators will be able to monitor (a) if the required data are being collected as well as (b) any developing patterns. The hope is that HPU administrators can refine their skills at understanding and addressing HPU's retention problem on a “real time” basis.

STUDY RESPONSIBILITIES:

Principal Investigator & Study Director

CAROLYN WEEKS-LEVY, Ph.D.

Responsible for study design, study oversight, and data interpretation.

Student Academic Services (SAS) Support Staff

STEPHANIE JARRETT, M.S.W.

Responsible for coach recruitment, coach training, and supervision of coaches during study.

DESIGN CLARIFICATIONS & ELABORATIONS:

Coaching:

Upper class students will be recruited as coaches for first-time, full-time freshmen for the incoming academic year. Each week the coaches will interview each of their assigned students. The interview will involve: (a) a quantifiable assessment of the student's perceptions on a number of variables (see below) and (b) clarification of a student's perceptions for any variables that are ranked negatively. Coaches will only be able to enter data on a weekly basis but will not, for student privacy, be able to review past data.

The coaches will go through a training process (approximately 20 hours of training) that will be provided by SAS.

Peer Coach Training will focus on five main areas

Unit 1 – Expectations

- What is Mentoring? What it means to be a mentor, reflection of mentors' first-year
- Expectations & Responsibilities – Required campus community involvement, office hours, monthly meetings, evaluations process, reporting safety and wellbeing concerns, providing HPU academic resource information Confidentiality – FERPA and student privacy
- Self-Care: Time-management, when and how to ask for help, role modeling satiable choices and life practices as a college student

Unit 2 – Communication & Connection

- Effective Communication – Active listening, verbal and written communication, helping skills
- Student Development Theory 101 – Maslow, Chickering, Astin, Schlossberg, Boyer, Sullivan, George Levinger's relationship model, George Casper Homans Social Exchange Theory, Uncertainty Reductions Theory
- A Year in the Life Of/Calendar of Help – Calendar of student issues to and possible conversation topics (refer to California University of Pennsylvania Mentoring Manual)
- Conflict Resolution – SA and College of Communications

Unit 3 – Resources

- Navigating Hawai'i Pacific University – HPU resources and services including Registrar, Financial Aid, Business Office, SLFYP, Com-muter Services, Academic Advising, Center for Academic Success, University Libraries
- Living in Hawaii – Community resources

Unit 4 – HR Requirements

- HR Training

Unit 5 – Social and Behavioral Responsible Conduct of Research Course

- Ethical conduct in research
- CITI online course

KEY VARIABLES:

It is important that the selected variables grow out of the existing retention literature as well as be quantifiable so they can be systematically analyzed. There needs to be a fine-grained analysis of variables that impact individual students negatively. Each week, coaches will rank students on a 1-6 scale with one being positive and six being negative for each of the following variables. Coaches will ask the student to explain any variables that are ranked negatively (5 or 6). The coach will then summarize in a minimum of 60 words the student's explanations. If the student has no negative perceptions on the key variables, the coach will provide a general 60 word statement about the student's progress in specific subjects for the past week as well as what the student likes about HPU.

The key variables are:

1. **Goals/Purpose:** Given the student's academic goal in attending HPU, does the student now feel she or he can achieve that goal at HPU?
2. **Progress:** Does the student feel she or he is making concrete progress toward the student's stated goal in attending HPU?
3. **Social Ties:** The degree to which the student feels she or he belongs socially. Does the student have a number of friends with which she or he interacts with on a regular basis?
4. **Academic Hurdles:** Is the student having problems with the classes she or he is taking?
5. **Financial Hurdles:** Is the student having problems with paying for school and or the demands of outside work the student is using to help cover the cost of school?
6. **Institutional Hurdles:** Is the student having problems navigating the institutional policies and regulations?
7. **Personal Hurdles:** Is the student having problems in her or his personal life that are impacting on the student's academic success?
8. **Level of Resilience:** To what degree does the student feel she or he can successfully overcome the problems/hurdles she or he is currently facing?
9. **Retention One:** Is the student committed to staying at HPU for the current year?
10. **Retention Two:** Is the student committed to staying at HPU next year?

Additional Question to be asked every four weeks (rather than weekly): Does the student feel attending class is helpful in learning course materials and doing well in class? Why?

A screen shot of the questions as they appear on the website is attached to this report.

DATA COLLECTION:

Data collected by the coaches will be entered into a database on a weekly basis. The coaches will not be able to go back to the previous week's data to view it or edit it, and will not have access to the data after the study is complete. Data that is submitted to the database will be coded so that no personal information will be directly attached to the collected data. The data will be stored offsite on a double secured server – with a key (tied to a specific computer) and a password – for extra security. The Director/Principal Investigator, and the SAS Facilitator will be able match the data with student IDs for analyzing the material. But no one else will have direct access to the complete set of materials.

Any publications or presentations resulting from the study will not contain any personally identifiable information with respect to student responses.

DATA ANALYSIS:

The data were evaluated by Dr. Weeks-Levy to understand if the students participating in the study had a higher retention rate compared to their control cohort of first-time, full-time freshmen (FTFTF) who did not participate in the study. First time, full time freshmen were assigned to either a study group, 271 students or a control group, 223 students at the beginning of the fall 2013 semester. A summary table of the data taken after the add/drop period is presented below.

Of the 271 students in the study cohort, data for 117 students was not analyzed due to the PAC's inability to contact the students leading to non-evaluable data (leaving 154 students). Registration data was taken after the add/drop date for the 2013 fall semester for the students participating in the study and showed that out of 154 students (evaluable data), 117 registered for classes (75.97% retention rate). In the control cohort of 223 students who did not have PACs assigned to them, 149 registered for the fall 2013 semester (66.82% retention rate).

Data analyzed for the students assigned a PAC, but who never did make contact with a PAC (117 students) showed a 70.09% retention rate (82 students returned).

HPU's official IPEDS retention rate for the fall 2013 for FTFTF is 70%. This rate includes the additional 117 students not included in the control cohort and not analyzed in the study cohort due to the PAC's inability to contact them. This explains the difference in the control cohort retention rate of 66.82% compared to the overall retention rate of 70%.

	Students	Retained	Retention
Study Cohort	154	117	75.97%
Control Cohort for Study (No PAC Assigned)	223	149	66.82%
Control Cohort for Study (PAC Assigned but No Contact)	117	82	70.09%
Total	494	348	70.45%
Actual Fall 2013 FTFT Freshman Cohort	494	348	70.45%