

HOW TO USE RECIPROCAL COMMUNICATION TO RETAIN STUDENTS

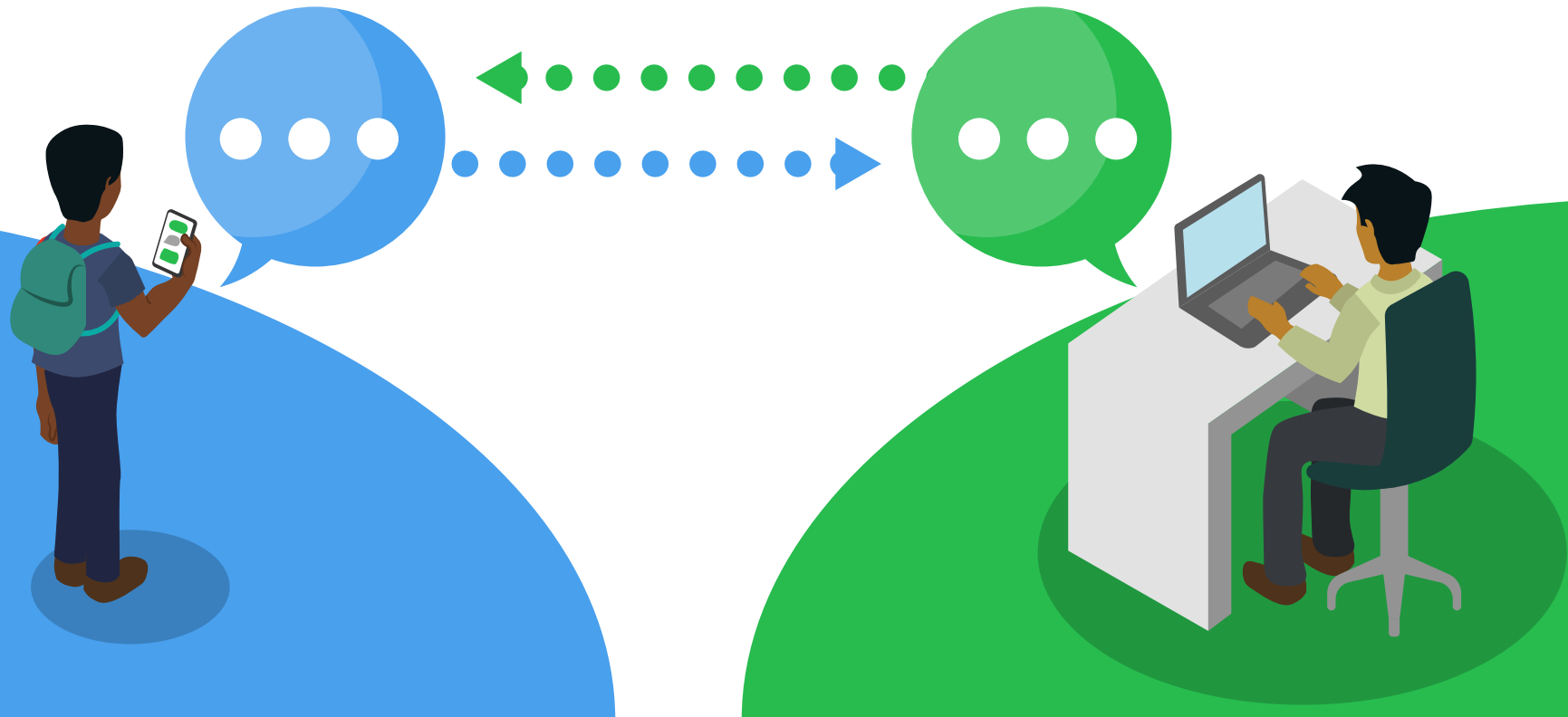


TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Cost of Not Finishing a Degree	4
The High Cost to Institutions	6
Why Students Stop Out	7
The Power of Communication Reciprocity	9
Retention Communication Strategy: Relevance.....	10
“Open” Messaging.....	12
Planning Saves Time and Energy.....	13
Takeaways.....	14

Introduction

Retention has been a hot discussion among academic institutions for over a century, and it has been a defined area of research for the last 46 years in the United States. In particular, **Tinto's research** and models have helped explain higher education dropout behaviors. The key finding? Students need to be integrated—both socially and academically—as well as to feel a sufficient level of collective affiliation in order to be retained by a school.

The proliferation of efforts to retain students—such as one-stops, student success centers, self-service kiosks, first-gen cohorts, first-year initiatives, and appreciative advising frameworks—demonstrate how important retention is to institutions. The cost of attracting and enrolling students is simply too high to let significant numbers of students leave. New initiatives that focus on making it easier for students to navigate through complex institutions also allow staff to identify why students are straying away from completing their degree.

Because many students go on to other institutions or resume their education at the same institution at a later time, the language has transitioned from “dropouts” to “stop outs.” Students take many different journeys to completion, sometimes taking necessary extended breaks from their education. In this case, institutions can encourage them to return and commit to making it easier for students to do so.

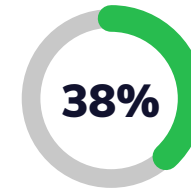
All that to say, we have a lot of opportunity to engage with these students at every stage of the funnel to support their success. The cost of not doing so is high to the student, institution and society at large.

RETENTION BY THE NUMBERS

An **updated report** (September 2021) found that 40% of students who enroll in postsecondary education in the U.S. never complete their degree; equating to around 37 million people.



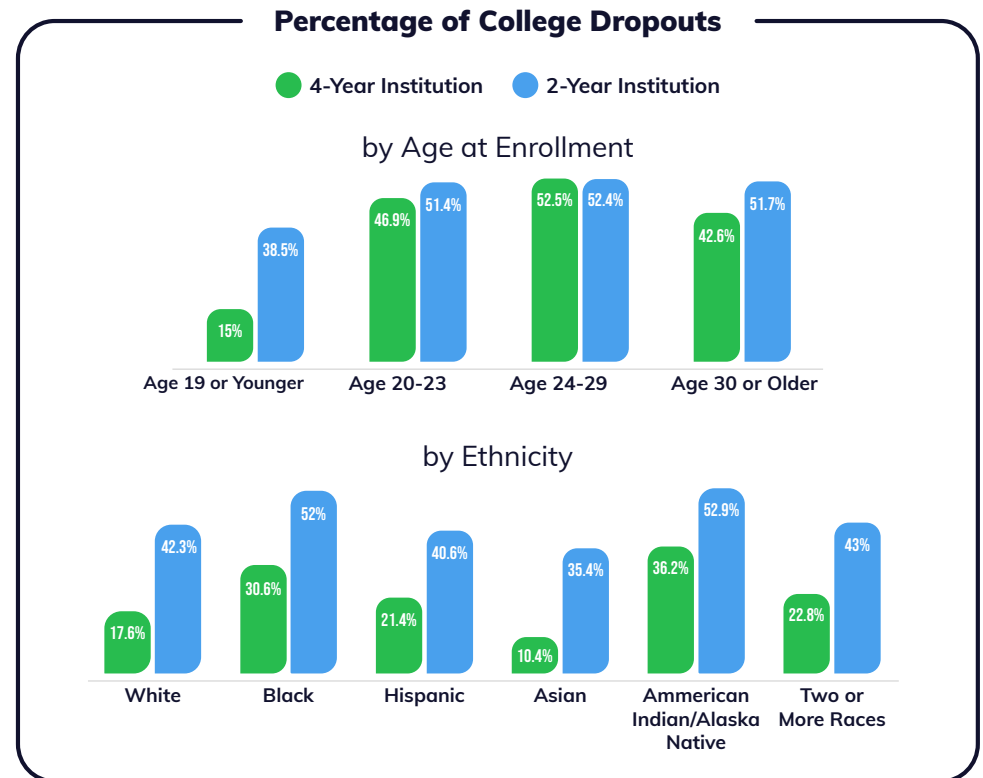
College freshman drop out before their sophomore year.



College stop outs say they left due to financial pressure.



Higher college dropout rates for male students in comparison to female students.





The Cost of Not Finishing a Degree:

The negative outcomes for students who do not complete a college degree are clear in national data. Our communities, our nation, and our global society, benefit when citizens complete postsecondary degrees. A vast amount of research demonstrates an **inverse association between higher education and depression**, plus better economic outcomes. Postsecondary education matters.

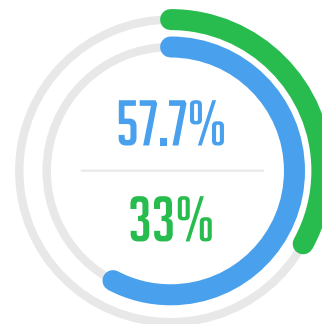
College dropouts are **70% more likely** to be unemployed and over four times more likely to default on their loans. On average, this group also earns 32% less than college graduates.

There is a national push for U.S. high schools to provide college preparation only. Outside of vocational trades, most employers in the U.S. expect entry-level employees to have a degree. Not completing a college degree has incremental drawbacks, including lower income. College dropouts earn, on average, about \$4 less per hour than high school graduates with a professional certificate or vocational training.

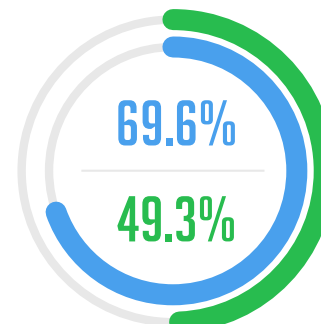
LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES

2017

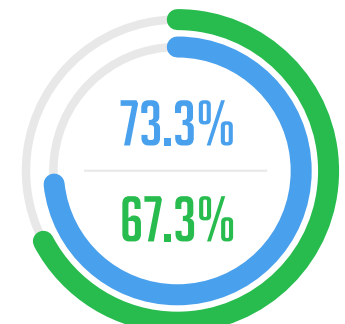
2020



High School Diploma



Associates Degree

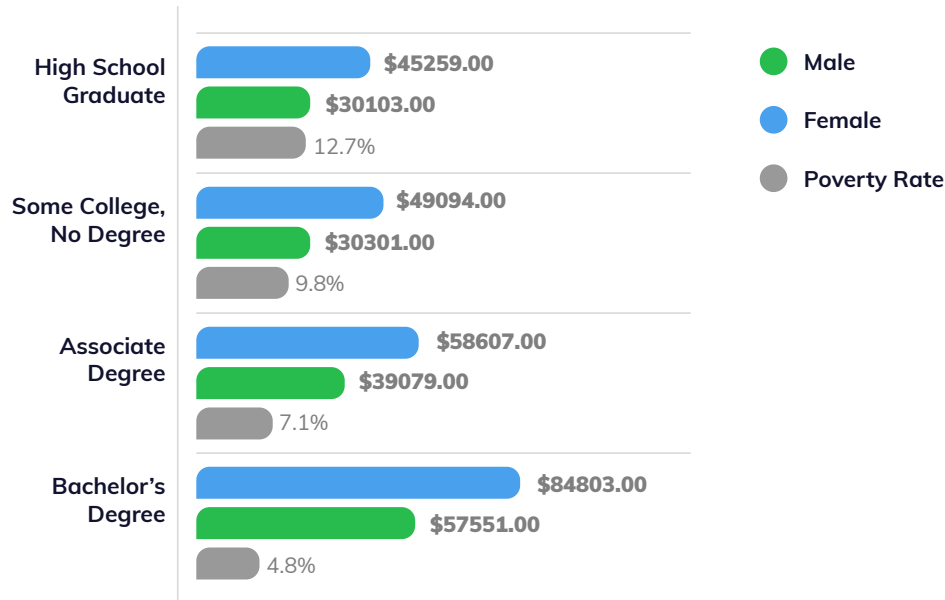


Bachelors Degree

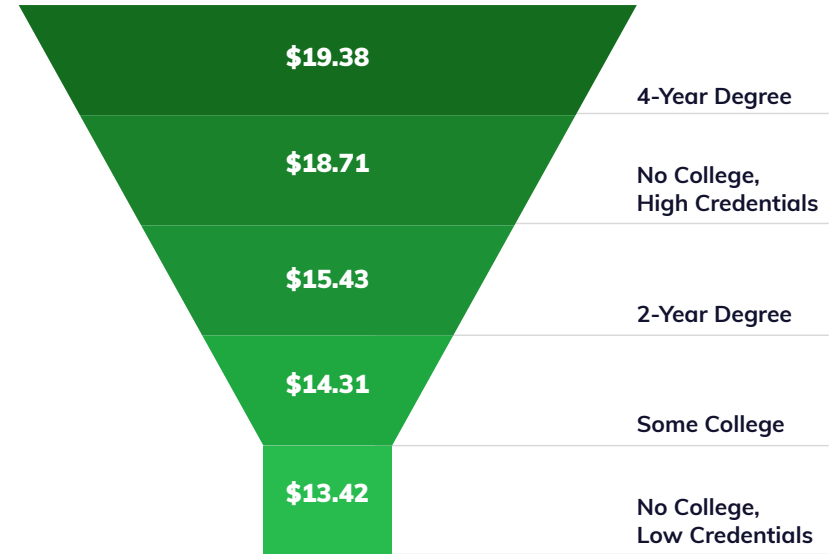
EARNING FACTS:

Adults who attend some college but don't graduate earn about \$1 less per hour, on average, than those with a two-year degree, and about \$5 less per hour, on average, than those with a four-year degree. On average, college stop outs earn \$21,000 less per year than college graduates.

Average Yearly Earnings in the U.S.



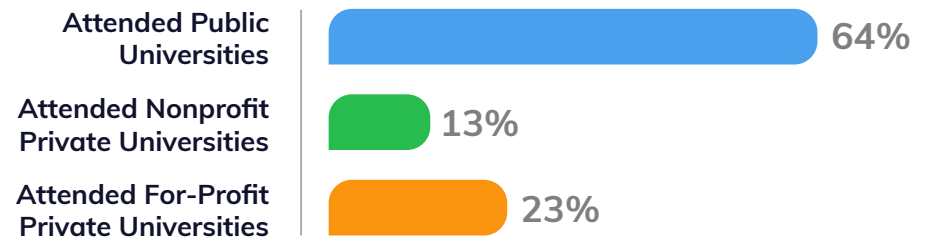
Median Wage



To make it worse for students not retained, college loans are difficult to cancel due to **bankruptcy**. Several million federal loans are commercially/privately held and are ineligible for the protections and benefits extended to other federal borrowers under the CARES Act



Dropouts With Student Loans

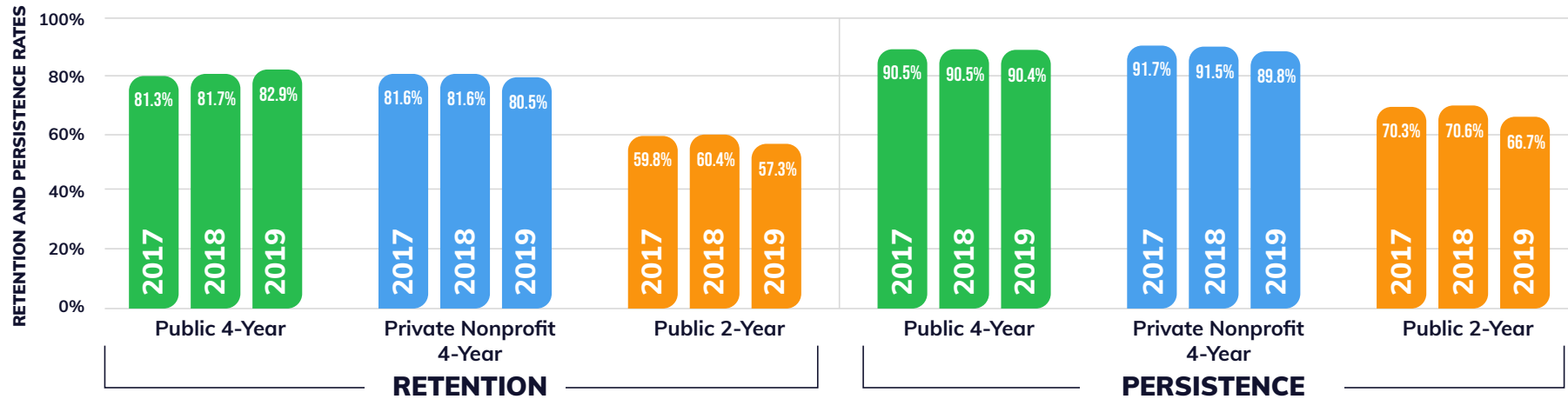


The High Cost to Institutions

Recruiting students is expensive. According to the College Board, the likelihood of enrolling in a four-year college among students in the 2020 high school graduates cohort was 3.3% lower than that of students in the 2019 cohort. The likelihood of enrolling in a two-year college in the 2020 cohort was 11.8% lower than that in the 2019 cohort. According to RNL's 2020 study, the cost (to the institution) of recruiting a student is often more than the cost of a 3-credit class.

\$16.5 Billion
Annual tuition
revenue loss

Figure 2: First-Year Retention and Persistence Rates Among College Students in the 2019 to 2019 Entering Cohorts



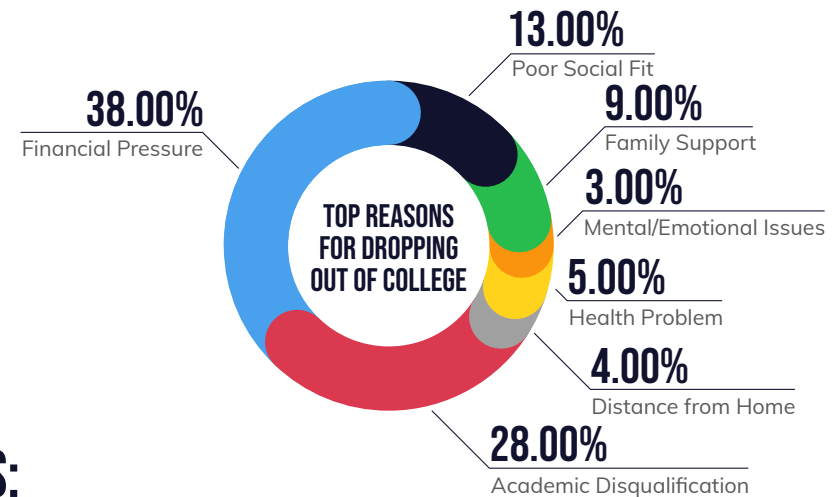
Note: First-year retention rates measure the share of students enrolling in the same college one year after initial enrollment. First-year persistence rates measure the share of students enrolling in any college one year after initial enrollment.

Figure 3: 2020 Cost of Recruiting a Single Undergraduate Student Minus Personnel Cost

Percentile	PRIVATE (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)				PUBLIC (overall median cost and median by enrollment size)			
	OVERALL	Smallest Third	Middle Third	Largest Third	OVERALL	Smallest Third	Middle Third	Largest Third
25th percentile	\$370	\$831	\$528	\$314	\$43	\$41	\$64	\$153
Median	\$1,086	\$1,200	\$1,234	\$828	\$214	\$592	\$249	\$171
75th percentile	\$1,664	\$1,764	\$1,849	\$1,331	\$614	\$743	\$665	\$235

Why Students Stop Out

There is no simple list of reasons that students drop out. Data show there are many variables that contribute to students dropping out. As Signal Vine has outlined in previous ebooks, students face numerous obstacles along their educational path. Dropout rates don't reflect how hard education providers are trying. Rather, they reflect how students are struggling to balance the demands of life and education, as well as to connect with the resources available to them.



VARIABLES THAT CONTRIBUTE MOST TO DROPOUT RATES:



Affordability: The cost of education continues to rise along with the cost of living while students are in college. State and federal higher education support continues to be inconsistent and largely declining. The median family income (+8%) has not kept pace with tuition increases (+34%).



Work: More students, both full time (>43%) and part time (>80%), are working while taking classes toward their degree. In fact, more than 10% of full-time students and 46% of part-time students work over 35 hours per week.



Academic Preparation: Nearly 25% of students who take standardized tests are required to take remedial college courses. Remedial college courses cost the student time and money, delaying graduation and increasing total tuition costs. Less than one in four students will declare a major and graduate after completing remedial coursework.



Undervaluing Education: From falsely believing that "I'm super smart and don't need what college is teaching me" to "I'm not smart/wealthy enough to go to college," students often underestimate the value of a college degree and exit their education journey too quickly with the additional burden of college loans obtained while they did attend.



Misperceptions: Popular culture often represents college as a social experience rather than a financial commitment. This causes students, parents, AND taxpayers to form a false sense of reality surrounding the pursuit of a degree. The perception of college students partying with a fraternity is met with the reality of most students having a quite different experience.



Mental Health: A survey of college dropout students conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) found that 64% of them left college because of mental illness. Of those, 45% did not seek any help on campus before dropping out.



Changing Demographics: Adult learners, low-income students, and students from underrepresented backgrounds (BIPOC) are changing who is in class while who is teaching class and leading institutions is slower to change. Each of these demographic changes comes with opportunities to rethink language, process, and support.

ADMINISTRATORS FACE INCREASING CHALLENGES, AS WELL:



Less Funding: Despite the CARES Act and HEERF funds, state and federal spending on higher education is lower today than it was in 2008. Simultaneously, there is strong resistance by administrators, boards, and students to raising tuition to fully offset the lost contribution.



Understaffing: Many colleges are unable to hire staff at pre-covid levels. Amidst ongoing furloughs/layoffs, vaccine mandates, retirements, and changes in post-Covid work environments, most higher education institutions haven't been able to fully staff teams. It's estimated that staff attrition in student affairs alone has reached over 50%.



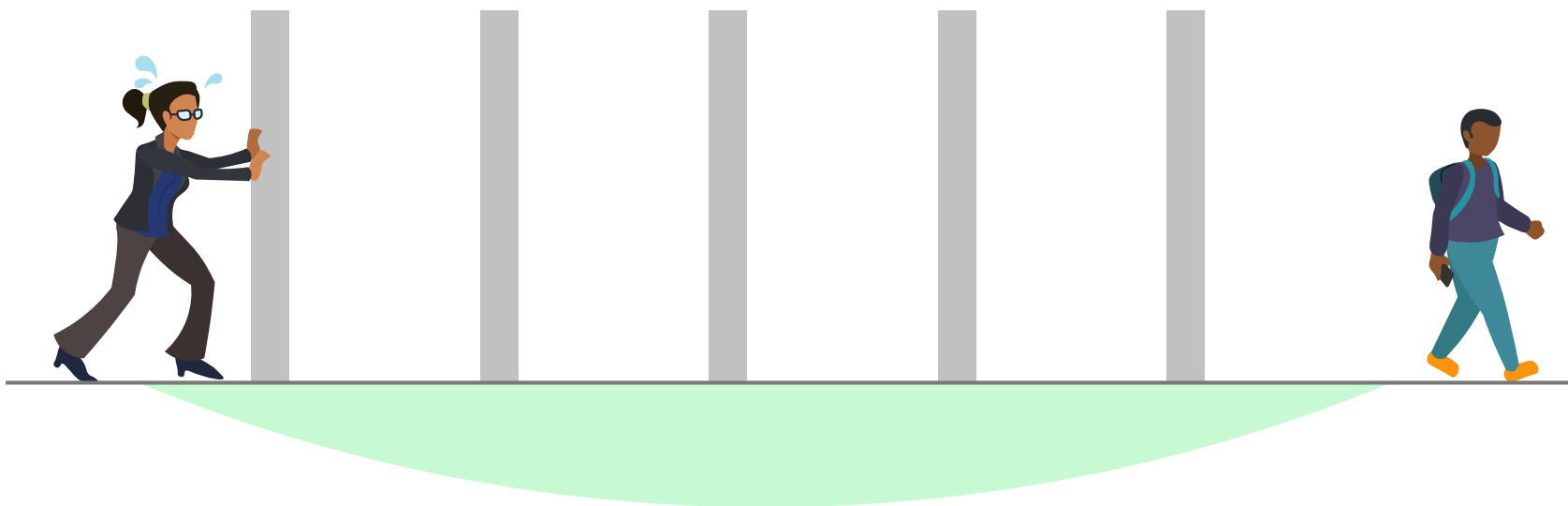
Lack of Student Insights: Administrators both struggle to contextualize trends and to implement institutional benchmarks and best practices that reflect their particular students. No two higher education institutions are the same. Even two institutions within miles of each other will have very different challenges and opportunities that would be revealed in student insights.



Misguided Policies: Lacking student insights, institutions often make assumptions based on anecdotal evidence. Big headlines, compelling stories, and standout students do not set the stage for strong policies and initiatives around overall student retention.



Time: Students are falling off the learning train at every stage of the journey, but institutions don't necessarily have staff time or the funding to figure out why certain parts of their funnel are leaking.



The Power of Communication Reciprocity: Student Engagement

Given the variety of challenges students and staff/administrators face, communication that is consistent, responsive, individualized, and timely is critical to retention. Sending out informational messages is not enough to retain students. Rather, regularly communicate with students on both transactional and non-transactional items. Seek feedback to encourage students to develop a habit of reciprocity, i.e. I give you some information, you give me some information. Students give many reasons for un-enrollment. Often what they say and how we can help takes time and follow-up questions to unpack.

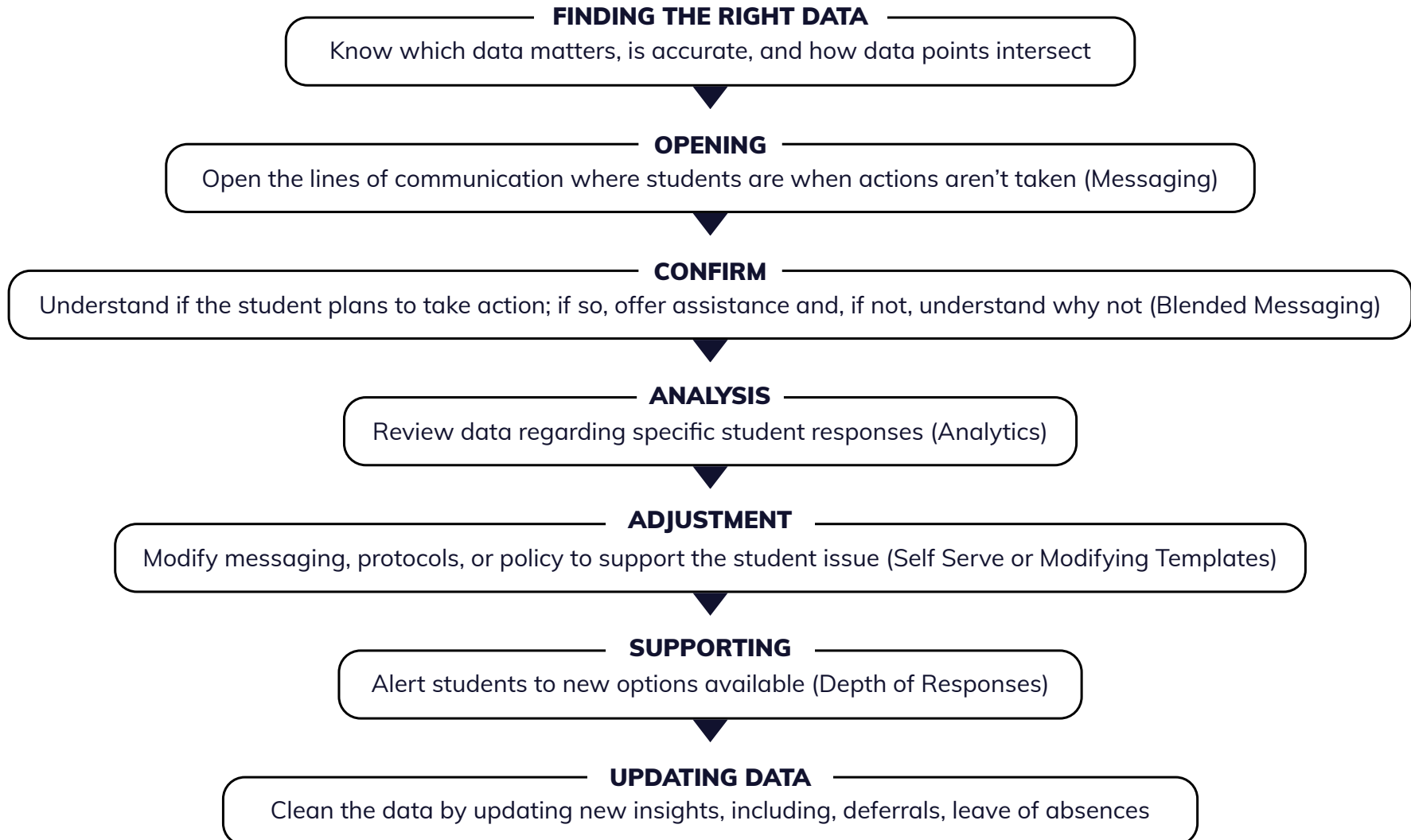


"I often hear campus leaders grumble that their students aren't engaging with them. And, in reviewing their communication, it is clear to me that there is no reason for students to; students are being told to do a million things. If they aren't doing what we want them to, there is a reason. Texting needs to have the same intentionality as if you were standing face-to-face with the student. You need to find out why the student isn't taking action - and that takes a question to get an answer."

Jesse Boeding, EdD

Retention Communication Strategy: Relevance

Engagement and connection are vital for students and institutions in a myriad of ways. Avoiding preventable stop outs may be one of the biggest incentives to build stronger communication with students. Using accurate data will ensure that students are getting relevant information. By using reciprocal messaging, the insights gained give front line staff focus and leadership guidance in how to modify processes, policy, and training.



CONTROL FOR DOWNTIME

Between the time a student ends a semester and starts the next, students often find reasons not to return. This can include doubt, lack of confidence, excitement about another opportunity, or changes in finances, to name a few. Stay in touch with students by using questions to gauge their need for resources or connections to key offices across campus including the career center, job assistance, or counseling. Engage with students across big breaks, such as summers and gap years, particularly around:

- Financial reminders and opportunities for scholarships or completing the FAFSA.
- Offer of prep classes, especially for math and writing.
- Access to resources, especially career development, tied to their major.
- Peer mentoring or nearby peer connections.
- Introductions to alumni.

RECONNECT WITH STOP OUTS

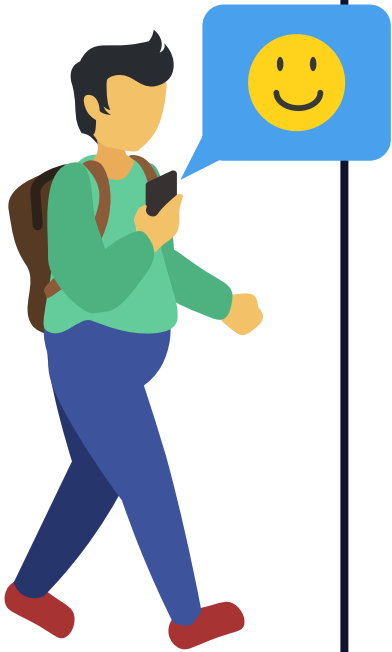
You never know when a student is ready to return. Letting them know that you are ready for them when the time is right can be priceless. Reach out, understand their objections, and determine if there is a path forward.

A “stop-out” campaign is designed to reengage students who spent time at your institution but didn’t return for reasons outside of transfer, suspension, or expulsion. Typical stop-out campaigns include a couple of emails, a phone call, and a text or two. Students who are interested in returning are then directed to a campus team member to work through reregistration. Many institutions will outsource this function due to time, effort, and technology limitations. However, outsourcing can be expensive, especially when there are large numbers of students to engage. What’s more, former students tend to avoid opening emails and answering phone calls.

To address this lack of effectiveness in reaching students who have stopped out, check out our [Signal Vine ReEngage™ solution](#). This solution is designed to:

- Engage with the student where they are most likely to respond—text messaging
- Leverage automation to discover if students are interested in returning
- Capture data on why students are reluctant or unable to return
- Guide students through the re-enrollment process
- Escalate the student to the right institutional team member to answer individual questions

Prioritize students who are close to completion, in high demand majors, or who have had significant academic success. Find out what they are planning, why, and how you might have a n opportunity for them.





PEAK EDUCATION
REACH HIGHER

“Open” Messaging

Peak Education’s Lauren Taylor piloted a new messaging approach called “open messaging.” Open messaging is consistent, positive, and reciprocal in contrast to “transactional messaging,” which is described as intermittent, telling, and nonresponsive.

The pilot found that the more consistently open messages are sent and students respond, the stronger students perform academically, as measured by GPA. Open messaging had a positive impact on both high-need students and students who are not considered high need. This pilot suggests that moving beyond transactional texting to a more caring texting strategy could impact student performance in meaningful ways thereby supporting student retention and removing some of the obstacles of continued enrollment and completion. While consistent and substantive outreach with students is necessary, personalized content drives student responsiveness to messages. Just as face-to-face communications build relationships through the acts of commenting and responding, texting does the same.

“Open texting works because it is relatable to everyone. It is not just a ‘student or kid thing.’ It’s a ‘person’ thing. The approach doesn’t just work for a particular location or subset of a population. All people want to belong and to be cared for. When a person feels these qualities in communications, they feel supported to be successful in life and in their community.”

- Lauren Taylor, Peak Education

To learn more about Peak Education, check out their pilot, [“Open” Messaging Positively Impacts GPA](#) and their case study, [Positive Messaging Impacts Student GPA](#).

Planning Saves Time and Energy

Institutions change fast these days. While there is often a desire to plan and move forward quickly, often it is hard to pause and plan for the next term comprehensively. But in working with institutions big and small, those that are well resourced and under resourced, we have found that planning saves time for both the staff and the student in the long run. **Ashley Bigard's work** on integrating texting into her Appreciative Advising model found that “planning enables more effective collaboration across campus, better training, less work, happier staff, and an opportunity to keep students positively challenged even when it might feel easier to drop out.”

RETURN ON INVESTMENT (ROI)

Making it easier for both the staff and the student



THE INVESTMENT

Spending 3 hours
Upfront to plan

Results

Students

- + Sense caring & intentionality
- + Feel a sense of ownership
- + Access to staff seems easier
- + Increased likelihood of action and requests for help when it is the optimal time to help them
- + Better student experience

Staff

- + Full transparency into student expectations
- + More time to work with the highest need students
- + Reduced workloads
- + Happier staff w/ higher retention
- + Better servicing of student



NO INVESTMENT

Too busy to plan ahead

Results

Students

- Disparate, disconnected messages
- Unlikely to take action or ask for help until it is an emergency
- Distracted from academic activities and requirements
- Poor student experience

Staff

- Don't know what messages are being sent by whom, resulting in impromptu messages sent on the fly
- Increased workloads as frustrated students try to get answers or ignore messages
- Staff burnout & attrition, negatively impacting servicing of student

TAKEAWAYS

Retention is challenging, but Signal Vine's platform offers powerful personalization and automation, including Blended Messaging. With texting tools that support a strategic approach to student retention, communication can become more streamlined, as well as more rewarding for students and staff alike.



- ✓ Be open to students responding on their timeline.

- ✓ Consider simplifying processes and sharing visuals.

- ✓ Use your own data in lieu of general institution benchmarks.

- ✓ Modify best practices to meet your student's needs.

- ✓ Use **Signal Vine ReEngage™** to reconnect with your students.

About Signal Vine

Signal Vine is the leading higher education AI messaging platform transforming how you reach, support, and engage students throughout their life cycle. With more than 50 million student interactions, Signal Vine's Blended Messaging® personalizes engagement using AI, workflow automation, and one-to-one messaging to keep students on the path to success. Signal Vine has been improving enrollment and retention outcomes with a proactive approach across the entire campus and student life cycle.

About Modern Campus

The Modern Campus engagement platform powers solutions for non-traditional student management, web content management, catalog and curriculum management, student engagement & development, career pathways, and campus maps & virtual tours. The result: innovative institutions can create a Learner-to-Earner Lifecycle that engages modern learners for life, while providing modern administrators with the tools needed to streamline workflows and drive high efficiency.

For more information, visit

signalvine.com

Written By:

Jesse Boeding, EdD
Ashley Belz, Marketing Associate

Produced By:

Lester Ona (Graphic Designer)
Radha Marcum (Copyeditor)