Enacting a Comprehensive Retention Strategy:

Working to Retain the Students We Recruit

Graham McKeague (Grand Rapids Theological Seminary)
Some questions to consider

• What are the top 3 reasons students might drop out of your school before degree completion?

• What are the top 3 reasons your students persist to degree completion?

• What would success look like for your students and for your staff?
Goals

- Improve student retention at GRTS
- Determine which factors contribute to student program completion
- Better understand student population
- Find ways for staff/faculty to better serve students
Defining Terms

• Attrition – why do students leave?

• Retention – why do students stay?

• Success – what is success for students?
Overview of GRTS

- Suburban campus in Grand Rapids, MI
- Multidenominational though Baptist roots
- Enrollment 330+
- 2/3 students part-time
- Many commuter students with low on-campus housing rate. Part of a larger university
- Students primarily drawn from West MI
- Largest programs: MA Counseling + Master of Divinity
- 60% male, 40% female
- 72% Caucasian, 28% Students of Color (23% African-American)
What We Did

- Research on retention and attrition
- Gathered data for understanding the “big picture”
- Student focus groups
- Reviewed transcripts
- Planning next steps
Research on Student Retention

- Tinto (social and academic integration)
- Bean and later Braxton – what about student characteristics that they bring to college?
- Complex mixture of internal and external influences
- No single “easy” answer
- We need more research on graduate students
Transcripts

- Took a sample of student transcripts

- MDIV or MA Counseling graduates/anticipated graduates between December 2010 and August 2013

- Compared with students who started within past 3 years but no longer enrolled
Looked at sample of student transcripts to gain understanding of specific enrollment patterns, including:

- Order of classes
- Length of enrollment
- Number of credits taken
- Semesters off
- Summer semesters

Compared graduating students with non-grads
What We Learned

• Degree completion rates and timeframe
• Specific class registration patterns
• Students want community and to be understood
• Student experience (work, ministry, commute, etc)
• How students begin is often how they continue
• Most students dropped out around 18-20 credits in
• Range of reasons for dropping – no single issue
Tracking Retention Rates

- Retention is measured twice each year:
  - Fall > Spring and Spring > Fall (not summer classes)
  - Remove graduates from pool
  - Measuring % of remaining students who return
  - Includes non-degree seeking
  - Typically in the 80-84% range
  - FA12: 78%; SP13: 82%; FA13: 80%; SP14: 88%
Additional Data

We have added to our data pool from last year and observed similar patterns from last year.

**Focus groups**: 22 students participated last month

- Faculty interaction important
- Community
- Plans can change

**Transcripts**: 95 MA Counseling, 72 MDiv
Reasons Students Leave

- Not enough time for classes
- Health reasons (physical and/or emotional)
- Family commitments
- Work commitments
- Transfer to another school
- Finances
- Academic performance
Work with Faculty

Faculty like information!

• 15 credit-hour review
• New advising process at orientation
• Mid-point assessments
Enrollment Office

Changes to advising

• Using data to advise students
• More accurate degree completion advice
• More targeted advice on specific class registration
• Detailed 1st year program planning
• Plan to graduate in 5 years
Enrollment Office

New Student Orientation

- More focus on community
- ‘Steps to Success’ workshop
- How to integrate your life as a student with the rest of your life
- More information sent up front by email
Enrollment Office

For returning students

• Institutional aid tied to registration window
• Regular contact by phone and email
• Increase in early registration (69% - increase of 11%)
• Better idea of what students to work with
• Pizza!
Student Retention Questions

• Where is your school in the process of retention work? Early? Working a plan?
• What are the main issues you have found in retention work?
• What success have you experienced?
Questions/Comments?

Contact:
graham.mckeague@cornerstone.edu