Retention issues need attention of the entire university

By Tony Hecimovic
And Gwen Braun

As faculty and staff have come together as members of the Retention Task Force to discuss and research student retention, it is clear that the issue involves more than an analysis of numerical data and that a single Band-Aid solution does not exist. Let’s begin by defining the issue.

The Definition
Retention at MSUB is defined at several levels.

- University Retention: Full-time, first-time students enrolled in the university who graduate within six years
- Program Retention: Full-time, first-time students who complete a degree program (six years/four-year college, three years/two-year college)
- Course Retention: The number of students enrolled in a course (at 15th day of the semester) who successfully complete the course
- Student Retention: The number of non-degree seeking students who have achieved their academic and/or personal goals.

The Problem
Data currently available show that MSU Billings’ university retention rate is lower than the national average for public

Temple of knowledge, temple of commitment

Looking for CQI in action? Look no farther than the library!

By Brent Roberts

“Interlibrary Loan is just so awesome!”
“The Interlibrary Loan program does an outstanding job!”

“Interlibrary Loan department is great!”

These are just a few of the comments about the MSU Billings Library’s Interlibrary Loan Department from a Fall 2006 survey.

In fact, one of the most often-repeated comments was a high level of satisfaction with our Interlibrary Loan service.

Interlibrary Loan is the system for sharing materials between libraries. The MSU Billings Library connects to a network of over 57,000 libraries throughout the United States and around the world to obtain the books, articles, DVDs, and other materials that researchers need. In most cases, requests are filled within a few short days.

In the last two years, our ILL Department, supervised by MSU Billings graduate Cheryl Hoover, has moved to an all-online system, where researchers can search for, request, and retrieve their materials electronically. Total satisfaction!
Standard 9: High standards matter

STANDARD NINE: Institutional Integrity returns to the most basic foundation of an institution: how well it establishes and adheres to high ethical standards in carrying out its mission and goals. It covers every aspect of the running of the institution, including teaching, scholarship, and service; treatment of students, faculty, and staff; and relationships between the institution and all of its relevant constituencies, including the public and accrediting agencies.

It examines policies, procedures, and publications of every kind; checks for potential conflicts of interest; and evaluates institutional commitment to “the free pursuit and dissemination of knowledge” (Accreditation Handbook 96).

Policy 9.1: Institutional Integrity explores the importance of institutional integrity to every aspect of an institution’s operation, emphasizes the unique nature of academic institutions, and offers a clear statement of the rights and obligations of all constituents to support intellectual freedom.

Library

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The ILL Department continues to raise the bar. In April 2007, we began using Odyssey, a protocol which facilitates faster fulfillment of researcher requests. According to Cheryl, MSU Billings was the first university library in Montana to utilize this state-of-the-art electronic transmission method.

Now, users can request materials online and receive them at their desktop, all without library staff intervention—and faster than ever before.

ILL response time has always been fast, but with this new method, delivery time for electronic documents has been drastically reduced—sometimes researchers receive their materials within minutes! Cheryl notes that in a recent transaction, a faculty member doing research received an article within ten minutes of submitting the request.

Are you looking for CQI in action? Look no further—the MSU Billings Library’s Interlibrary Loan Department is setting the standard. Just be careful: they move so fast, you might not be able to see them!

The CQI Library Collection

Do you have a question about accreditation or assessment? The CQI Office, located in McMullen 308, has a collection of library books for individuals to use. Visit the CQI website at www.msubillings.edu/cqi to view the listing of materials (under Activities and Projects).

Retention

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four-year universities. Approximately 53 to 56 percent of the university’s freshmen re-enroll for a second year, compared to a national average of 66 to 70 percent.

The Models

All three commonly accepted retention models (Tinto Model, Astin’s Student Involvement Theory, and Person-Fit Environment Theory) recognize the following factors in a student’s persistence:

- Individual student goals and commitment
- Institutional experiences (formal and informal, academic and social)
- The extent to which the individual becomes academically and socially integrated into an institution

The Best Practices

As explained in a webinar presented last fall by the University of Connecticut, an institution heavily engaged in researching and increasing retention for the past 10 years, a university must know itself and its students before improvements can be made. Getting to know students entails more than demographic data; knowing students’ expectations of their college experience is critical. As the models indicate and UConn’s studies demonstrate, students leave because their expectations are not met, and those expectations vary to a great extent. Common best practices to increase retention center on the following:

- Early identification of students not likely to persist: prior to enrollment, at application/orientation, and post-application/orientation
- Early, intensive and continuous intervention for students identified as having the characteristics of those who depart early

Preliminary Recommendations

The Task Force gathered information on current practices at MSUB and discovered many departments contributing to the university’s retention efforts. However, to increase retention we must do the following:

- Know our students better as individuals, especially their expectations of MSU Billings.
- Know ourselves better. What are our “pride points” that will attract students and involve them in the university community? In effect, retention starts with the institution, at the point of recruitment. As UConn said, an institution must know itself as well as its students. A university must know what it wants to be in order to focus its efforts on recruiting and retaining students who “fit” the organization.
- Recognize that retention involves all areas of university life: faculty, academic programs, staff, student services and social activities.
- Improve early identification of and intervention for students who demonstrate characteristics of those who do not persist.

Options include mandatory advising; an increased emphasis on A&SC 101; the creation of an academic recovery program; focus groups, interviews, and surveys to determine students’ expectations; the hiring of a retention counselor; increased faculty involvement; increased retention tracking by course, department and program; peer mentors; midterm grades for all students; living-learning communities.

A final recommendation is to combine the three task forces that artificially separate recruitment, advising, and retention because retention relies on appropriate, targeted recruitment and ongoing advising.