

ACADEMIC AFFAIRS FORUM



Strategies to Identify, Understand, and Prevent Student Withdrawal

Custom Research Brief

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I. Research Methodology

Project Challenge Leadership at a member institution approached the forum with the following questions:

- What factors do administrators consider to identify and track students who withdraw from the institution? How do administrators determine these factors?
- What factors or limitations prevent an institution from tracking student withdrawal?
- What steps compose the withdrawal process at other institutions? What factors influenced its design?
- Which offices are responsible for identifying student withdrawal? How is student withdrawal information shared with other institution offices?
- What are the staffing resources necessary to identify student withdrawal?
- What factors (e.g., admission materials, financial status, health status, etc.) allow institutions to identify students at risk of withdrawing, even if students are in good standing? How do administrators use this information to prevent students from withdrawing?
- What methods do institutions use to communicate with students who withdrew?
- Which offices are responsible for reaching out to students who withdraw? What are the staffing resources necessary to reach out to these students?
- How do institutions collect and track feedback from students who withdraw? How do these findings inform strategies to prevent student withdrawal?
- Which variables most influence students' decision to withdraw from an institution? How have these variables changed over time?

Project Sources The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- Advisory Board's internal and online research libraries (www.educationadvisoryboard.com)
- The Chronicle of Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com>)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)
- University A Web site
- University B Web site
- University C Web site
- University D Web site
- University E Web site
- University F Web site
- University G Web site



Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed student and academic affairs administrators at seven large public institutions in the United States.

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

Institution	Location	Approximate Enrollment (Undergraduate/Total)	Classification
University A	Midwest	23,700/31,000	Research Universities (very high research activity)
University B	Midwest	23,100/28,700	Research Universities (very high research activity)
University C	Midwest	21,200/29,500	Research Universities (very high research activity)
University D	Midwest	24,800/32,300	Research Universities (very high research activity)
University E	Midwest	30,200/42,200	Research Universities (very high research activity)
University F	Mid-Atlantic	32,200/41,100	Research Universities (very high research activity)
University G	Midwest	20,800/31,500	Research Universities (very high research activity)

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Definition of Terms

Official Withdrawal: A student formally notifies the registrar's office and the dean of student's office of their intent to withdraw from the institution. The student may retain a period of eligibility for re-enrollment after withdrawing from the institution.

Drop-out: A student leaves the institution without completing the formal withdrawal process; the student is listed within institutional systems as a missing student until their withdrawal can be verified.

II. Executive Overview

Key Observations **Most students withdraw from contact institutions voluntarily, usually for personal and health reasons; less than one percent of students withdraw because of academic ineligibility.** Students with low academic performance, while eligible to continue at the institution, may withdraw citing personal reasons. Contacts note that financing the cost of attendance, military reactivation, and family-related issues are other common motivating factors for student withdrawal. Existing student enrollment management systems, in conjunction with student retention software, store data on students who have withdrawn from the institution.

Contacts use the period of enrollment eligibility as the benchmark to determine whether student drop-outs have permanently withdrawn from the institution. Most institutions allow students two terms to re-enroll in the institution before eligibility is forfeited. Students who withdraw while in good standing must contact their academic advisors and/or their academic deans to regain their eligibility. Institutions where students indefinitely retain their eligibility permit students to re-register for two terms before listing the student as a potential drop-out.

Administrators use enrollment, attendance, and financial/bursar data to identify students who have left campus without formally withdrawing (i.e., dropping out). Contacts developed reporting systems in which faculty submit missing student reports five weeks into each term to a student success committee. Financial aid and bursar's offices forward cases in which students missed tuition payments or are at risk of losing financial aid to a student success committee. After reviewing missing student cases, the student success committee forwards cases to each student's academic advisor. Contact institutions also send notification lists to advisors of students who have failed to register for classes either at the end of early registration or two weeks after the beginning of the term. Students in all of these cases are assumed to have dropped out of the institution.

Students' academic advisors are primarily responsible for reaching out to students who either have withdrawn or are at risk of withdrawing. Some contact institutions have no requirements regarding when advisors should reach out to students; the advisor makes an individual decision to contact a student. Other institutions use student success committees and automatic early alert systems to identify student withdrawal cases; these cases are forwarded to academic advisors who are obligated to contact students. Most advisors use either phone calls or emails to institution-provided accounts to contact students.

Most contact institutions integrate student success and retention software with the institution's learning management systems to identify students at risk of withdrawing from the institution based on academic and financial predictors (e.g., course withdrawal, GPA, bursar payments, etc.). Most institutions rely on third-party templated software that is customized to integrate with existing student data storage systems. These systems are accessible by academic advisors and senior administrators and are subject to HIPAA and FERPA restrictions. Retention systems often have a built-in early warning system that notifies advisors of students who are at risk of withdrawing from the institution.

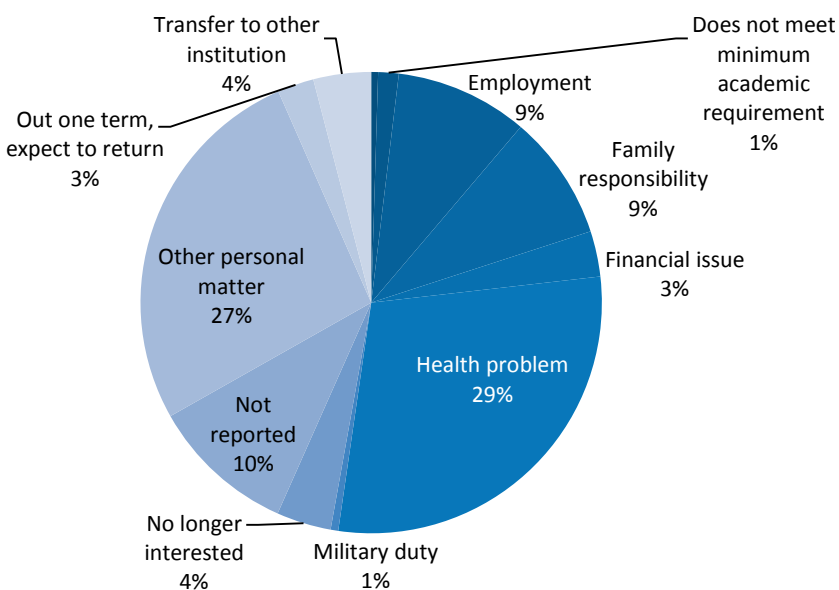
Institutions should redesign withdrawal processes to emphasize exit counseling and use simplified forms to increase the likelihood of re-enrollment. Prior processes relied on a paper-based system that required the student to independently attend to outstanding business (e.g., housing, financial aid). A revamped system requires students to meet with a counselor in either the office of the dean of students or the office of retention to discuss the reasons for withdrawal, available resources, and final steps before leaving campus, as well as process the withdrawal. Counselors also discuss the process for re-entry at the institution without pressuring the student to return. Contacts emphasize that students are more willing to re-enroll when they leave campus with a positive perspective.

III. Identifying Student Withdrawal

Official Withdrawal *Withdrawal Processes Collect Information from Students on Macro-level Motivating Factors*

At **University B** and **University E**, 90 percent of students who officially withdraw from the institution indicate a standardized reason for withdrawal (e.g., personal, academic, employment, family, financial, medical, veteran, and other). Enrollment management staff aggregate and analyze this information. Registrar office staff determine which macro-level categories to include on withdrawal forms; current categories correspond to the policies on re-entry and readmission of withdrawn students. Students who re-enter after military activation face different requirements than students who withdraw for personal reasons. All contact institutions use an enrollment management system (e.g., PeopleSoft/ISIS) to store all information regarding a student's withdrawal from the institution.

Distribution of Reasons for Official Withdrawal at *University B*
Between Fall 2008 and Spring 2012 Terms



Most students officially withdraw from University B for personal reasons (either health or another personal matter). Only one percent of students at University B and University E officially withdraw from the institution due to not meeting the minimum academic requirements for the institution. While only one percent of students withdraw due to military reactivation at University B, contacts at **University C**, **University F**, and **University G** note that military reactivation is a significant reason for withdrawal from their institutions.

Student Drop-out *Institutions Rely on Enrollment Eligibility Standards to Determine Whether a Student Has Dropped Out*

Most contacts rely on the institution's policies on enrollment eligibility to determine whether a student no longer on campus has completely withdrawn from the institution.

- Students at **University C**, **University D**, and **University F** are allowed two semesters after they withdraw to return to the institution without forfeiting their enrollment eligibility.

- Students at **University E** are only permitted one semester to return to campus.

Students at all institutions who drop-out or official withdraw from the institution may re-enter the institution after meeting with their academic advisors or their academic dean. Students who withdraw while on probation or failing multiple courses can either petition their particular college for re-entry or re-apply to the institution entirely.

Contacts at **University G** note difficulty in using eligibility standards to determine whether a student has permanently withdrawn from the institution because students indefinitely retain their eligibility to re-enter and enroll in the institution. Enrollment management staff refer to the general principle that if a student misses two registration periods (i.e., two terms), the student should be considered a withdrawal from the institution.

Student Success Committees Identify Missing Students Using Enrollment, Attendance, and Financial Data

Contacts at **University C** explain that faculty must file a non-attendance report for all students who fail to attend classes after the first five weeks of class each term. Faculty submit this report through an online reporting process into the institution's central student management system. The early intervention team aggregates all institutional data on students listed in non-attendance reports to determine if a student has dropped out (versus clerical errors). The financial aid office also provides a list of students who are not attending the institution based on whether students have satisfied all requirements to retain their financial aid. Students in jeopardy of losing financial aid who have not withdrawn from the institution receive direct outreach from the financial aid office to address the matter.

Student Success Committees Collect Data on and Determine Outreach to Student Drop-outs

Multiple offices (e.g., academic affairs, student affairs, etc.) at contact institutions coordinate the identification of and outreach to students who have dropped out through weekly student retention committee meetings.

Common Student Success Committee Representatives By Office

Office	Administrative Representatives
Academic Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vice Provost for Academic Affairs • Deans of colleges and schools
Student Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Associate Dean(s) • Director of Retention
Enrollment Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management • Institution Registrar
Financial Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Associate Dean for Financial Aid • Director of the Bursar's office

The early intervention team (student success committee) at **University C** comprises representatives from seven student-facing offices (e.g., student affairs, housing, financial aid, etc.) who work to determine definitively if a student has dropped out from the institution. This

group identifies students that trigger drop-out risk factors in their offices (e.g., a scholarship student who registered for classes but not for housing). If the team is unable to resolve a drop-out case during their weekly meetings, the student's academic advisor follows up with the student to determine what further actions the institution can take to retain the student. All information on student withdrawal cases is stored in an institution-wide database, which tracks academic data from the registrar and advisors, financial data from financial aid, and health and family data from counseling services.

FERPA and HIPAA Regulations Limit the Data That Administrators Can Access

Contacts at **University B** and **University F** note that Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and Health Information Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) requirements limit administrator access to sensitive student data (e.g., application materials, academic records, health records, etc.). In order to comply with federal regulations and protect student privacy, only high-level administrators in offices responsible for managing student affairs have access to this information (i.e., the registrar's office, enrollment management, and student affairs).

IV. Understanding and Preventing Student Withdrawal

Outreach to Withdrawn Students

Students who withdraw from the institution rarely check their institution email, which is the only official method to electronically communicate with students.

Academic Advisors are Responsible for Contacting Withdrawn Students

All contact institutions rely on academic advisors to initiate and manage all outreach to students who have withdrawn from the institution. Most institutions are limited to phone and email outreach. Contacts at **University G** note that students who withdraw from the institution rarely check their institution email, which is the only official method to electronically communicate with students. Contacts at **University E** note that when students are eligible to re-enroll in the institution, they receive physical mail from the institution apprising them of their options.

Advisors at **University B** use the institution's student retention software to identify students with jeopardized academic standing, either through poor academic performance or failing to register for classes for the next term. Advisors reach out to students to determine the cause of the academic issue and, if necessary, recommend students withdraw formally from the institution to preserve their GPA (and improve their ability to either re-enroll in the institution or transfer to another institution). Advisors also connect students with appropriate staff in financial aid or student health or develop a plan for re-entry. The decision to contact students who have dropped out is at the discretion of each academic advisor.

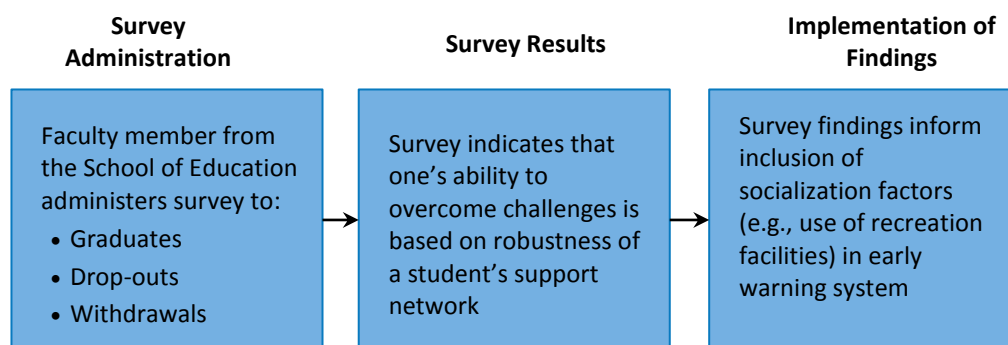
Targeting Near-complete Undergraduates: *University D*

Contacts at **University D** have developed an outreach program led by academic advisors that targets students with 100-120 credit hours completed who could graduate with one additional semester of courses. Approximately five percent of students who withdraw from the institution meet this criterion. These students are most easily reached via their institution email. Most students contacted are still eligible to enroll for classes.

Departing Student Surveys *Faculty Survey Students Leaving the Institution to Understand Challenges Students Face*

Administrators at **University G** and **University D** commissioned a faculty member from the Center for Urban Studies and the School of Education, respectively, to develop and administer a mailed survey to both students who graduate from the institution as well as those who drop out or officially withdraw. Students identify the challenges faced during their time on campus and any resources or individuals they relied on to overcome these challenges. The survey found that the challenges (e.g., academic performance, health, and cost of attending) were nearly identical for both students who graduate and students who withdraw from the institution. However, graduates had more robust support networks (e.g., friends, family, advisors, etc.) than students who withdraw from the institution. The survey also found that a student's high school academic performance (i.e., grades) is a better predictor for risk of withdrawal than high school standardized test scores (e.g., ACT, SAT, etc.). Student and academic affairs administrators at **University D** used the findings of this survey to inform the institution's early warning system for student withdrawal; the institution now includes socialization factors in its early warning system (*see section below for Early Alert Systems*).

Departure Survey Stages at University D



Contacts at **University A** and **University C** administer a survey to first year students, which assesses their impression of and experience with collegiate life. Questions in the survey ask students to describe their experience at the institution, their level of engagement, their satisfaction with the institution, and their intention to stay or leave the institution. The survey is built into MAP-Works, an EBI product, which compares survey results against a student's high school statistics (e.g., GPA, SAT/ACT scores, etc.). MAP-Works provides an early warning system for administrators by allowing students to directly communicate their intention to leave the institution early in the semester. Faculty who teach required first-year writing courses conduct the survey in weeks three through six of the fall term. Office of retention staff analyze the data to identify students who either express a desire to drop out of the institution or show warning signs through their survey results (e.g., not socializing, high academic stress, etc.).

University A is realigning their departure survey questions with the questions in the MAP-Works survey to facilitate a long-term analysis of the factors that lead to student withdrawal. Based on factors identified in the first-year and departure surveys, contacts hope to identify subpopulations of students at risk of withdrawing from the institution and develop targeted programs and initiatives to minimize that risk.

Student Retention Software

Student and Academic Affairs Administrators Build Student Withdrawal Profiles in Institution-wide Retention Software

Student retention software provides administrators with centralized access to valuable data housed in offices across the institution which helps administrators identify students who are at risk of withdrawing from or dropping out of the institution. Typical student retention software aggregates and analyzes student data to provide metrics based on:

- **Academic performance:** attendance, enrollment, relative grade point average for the student's major, grades in high-failure classes, etc.
- **Financial standing:** bursar holds, debt loads, etc.
- **Campus socialization:** recreation facility use, student organization membership, etc. (at some institutions)

Advising systems (e.g., systems that monitor a student's academic progress) are built into some student retention software; the advising functions provide advisors with information about the student's relative academic performance to peers in their major, whether the student is on track to graduate on-time¹, and early-alert notifications (e.g., for poor class attendance, low midterm grades, failing to enroll in classes, etc.).

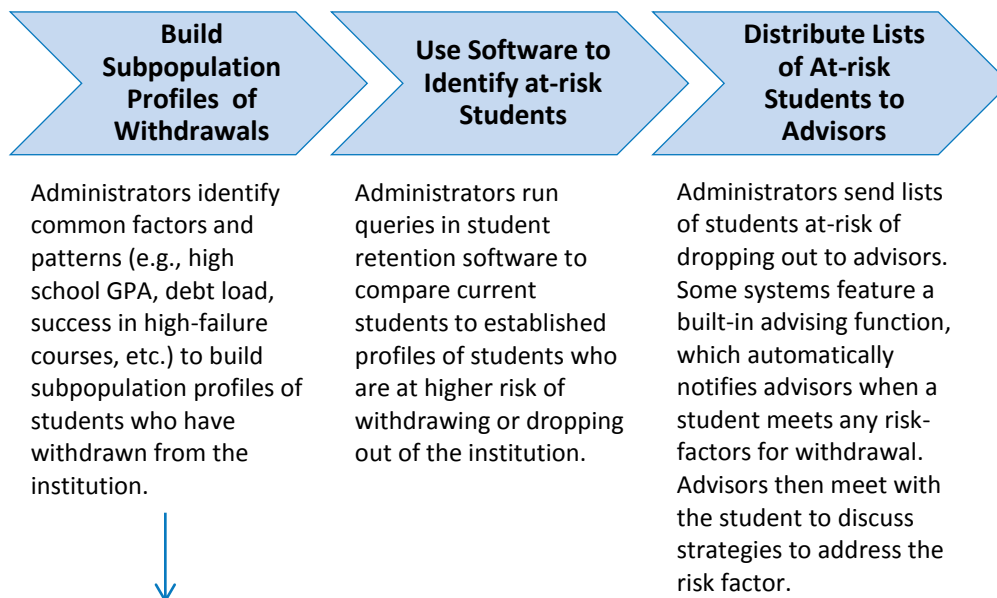
Features of Student Retention Software at Contact Institutions

	University A & University C	University B	University D	University G
Software Used	MAP-Works	Banner	Starfish	Student Tracking and Retention System (STARS) (Banner-based)
Internally developed or Vendor-based	Vendor-based	Vendor-based	Vendor-based	Vendor-based but highly customized
Data sources analyzed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey results • Student demographics • High school performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic records • Financial standing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic records • Financial standing • Student demographics • Student socialization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic records • Financial Standing • Student demographics • High school performance
Integrated early alert system	No	No	Yes	Yes

¹ Within 4 to 6 years, depending on parameters set by the institution.

Student retention software uses student profiles compared against existing student populations to determine which populations are at risk of withdrawing from the institution. Students identified at risk are then flagged by student retention administrators for academic advisors to begin holding discussions and planning intervention with students.

Strategies to Intervene with At-risk Students Using Student Retention Software



Considerations When Building Subpopulation Profiles

- Administrators at **University D** customized their third-party student retention software to track additional data (e.g., the socialization of students), based on retention factors identified in an institutional study of all departing students (both graduates and non-graduates).
- Administrators at **University G** focus on building subpopulations around high school predictors, current and projected GPA, and transfer history, based on the results from a departing student study conducted by the institution's Center for Urban Studies.

Student retention teams (e.g., an assessment officer in the office of the provost, an assessment analyst in the office of student affairs, and an analyst from the office enrollment management) at **University A** and **University C** process student indicator data together to determine which students have either self-identified as intending to withdraw from the institution or meet standard risk categories for risk of withdrawal.

University B uses Banner to house all student retention data. However, the queries to draw out the information are managed through IBM Cognos, which allows for highly customized reports (e.g., focusing on specific range for one or more metrics, isolating a particular student subgroup, etc.). While the Banner/Cognos system has the capacity to identify students who meet certain risk categories (i.e., academic and financial standing), administrators do not actively use the system to address student retention concerns, due to minimal retention issues at the institution.

Early Alert Systems *Administrators Use Existing Data to Determine and Profile Students at Risk for Withdrawal*

60%

Withdraw With Good Academic Standing

Sixty percent of students who withdraw from **University D** are in good academic standing, but have other issues that prevent them from registering for classes.

Administrators at **University D** have developed an early warning system based on the Starfish software platform. Institutional research determined that 60 percent of students who withdraw from the institution are still in good academic standing but face challenges such as financial holds that prevent them from registering for classes. Instead of resolving the issues, students leave issues unaddressed, do not register for classes, and drop out of the institution.

To address this trend in student withdrawal, administrators created an early warning system that alerts academic advisors of students in good academic standing who have not registered for classes at the end of early registration (i.e., course registration before the conclusion of the current term). Advisors then use phone and email communication to help students resolve outstanding problems so that they will continue on to the next semester. The office of financial aid also sends a list of students who have financial holds ahead of the early registration period to advisors; advisors also work with students to address these issues so that students can register during the early registration period. Since making this change, the percentage of students not registered for classes that are retained the next semester has increased from five to 15 percent.

Contacts at **University E** and **University F** explain that their institutions lack robust early alert systems that notify advisors when students are at risk of dropping out. Instead, advisors must rely on automatic mid-term grade reports sent by the institution's learning management and enrollment management systems (e.g., Blackboard and PeopleSoft/ISIS, respectively). The system at University F notifies academic advisors of students with low grades across all classes within the first six weeks. Academic advisors at University E only receive notification of a student's poor academic standing (e.g., probation) after the completion of the term.

Student Programming and Policies *Student and Academic Affairs Programming Addresses Concerns Raised in Student Withdrawal Feedback*

Contacts at **University F** explain that their institution has focused on developing large-scale initiatives that address core issues motivating students to withdraw: lack of campus socialization and academic preparation.

Faculty and administrators at University F created a first-year Pathways to Success program, which provide students curricular and co-curricular opportunities to explore an academic discipline in a small seminar environment. Students take courses within a certain thematic area and also meet with faculty for co-curricular seminars and dinners to comprehensively engage in the academic content of the pathway. Approximately half of the first-year class voluntarily participates in these programs, and the courses in this program receive \$1 million annually from the institution's budget to support curriculum and program development.

Administrators at University F also invested in the institution's Student Success Center, which aids students in the transition from high school to college by helping students develop critical skills (e.g., study habits, time management) and by providing tutoring services. Administrators also developed a Summer Academy program that students can attend to begin adjustment to the institution's campus before classes begin. Although the program is voluntary, students with less college preparation in high school receive targeted outreach.

Administrators should develop programming to address core issues (i.e., lack of campus socialization and academic preparation) that increase risk of student withdrawal.

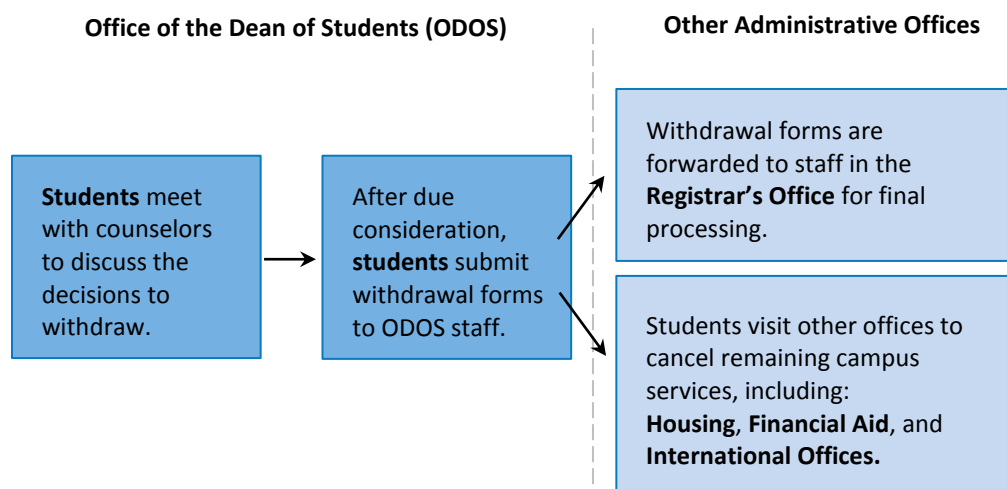
Students who attend this program are reportedly more confident and knowledgeable about the campus, and generally adjust faster to academic life than those who do not.

Withdrawal and Re-entry Processes

Personal Attention during Student Withdrawal Helps Communicate Staff Resources Available When Students Re-enroll

The withdrawal process at **University B** begins in the Office of the Dean of Students (ODOS). When students arrive at ODOS intending to withdraw from the institution, students meet with ODOS counselors, who ensure that students are making this decision after properly considering all factors and consequences (including discussing the matter with family and friends). Counselors also encourage students to reflect on their situation before making their final decision, and refer students to other resources (e.g., student health and counseling services, financial aid, etc.) that might provide support. Afterwards, a student submits withdrawal forms to ODOS, but the formal withdrawal is processed through the institution's Registrar's Office. The withdrawal form first asks for demographic information (e.g., age, gender, ethnic background, socioeconomic standing, etc.) about the students so the withdrawal can be processed. The second section provides students with a list of all departments they may need to contact to fully withdraw from the institution (e.g., housing, financial aid, etc.). International students are explicitly advised to contact the international office to discuss any visa-related problems as a result of their withdrawal. Students must initial next to each recommendation to signal that they understand the responsibilities incumbent with withdrawal.

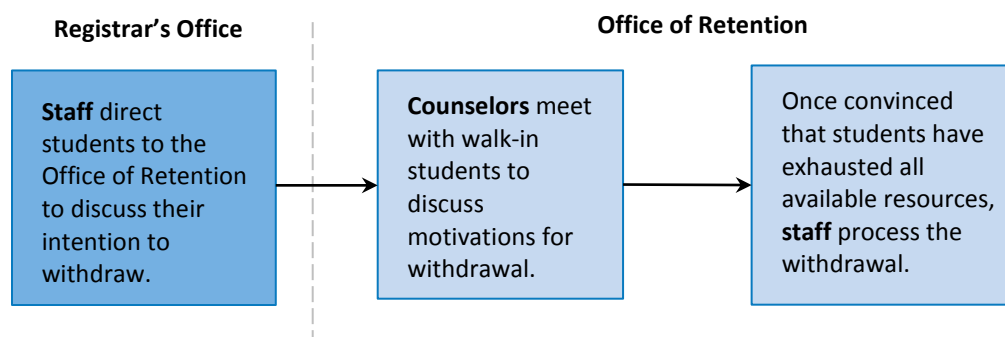
Withdrawal Process at **University B**



A state regulation requires administrators at **University C** to survey all first-year students to understand student retention factors at the institution; administrators used this as an opportunity to overhaul their withdrawal system. Students who withdraw from the institution begin at the registrar's office. Students are then directed to the Office of Retention (located in the same building) to discuss the reasons for withdrawal and any unresolved issues that need attention before a student leaves campus (e.g., housing, financial aid, etc.). Staff in the Office of Retention do not try to convince students to remain on campus, but instead focus on ensuring that the student has considered all aspects (e.g., housing, value of graduating, debt, etc.) before committing to withdraw from the institution. Staff also apprise students of the steps necessary to re-enroll in the institution (e.g., contacting their academic advisor, etc.). Contacts emphasize

that the goal of meeting with students before they complete withdrawal paperwork is to ensure that students utilized every possible on-campus resource and that their withdrawal is the last possible recourse for the student.

Withdrawal Process at University C



Contacts at **University C** emphasize that the face-to-face interaction in the withdrawal process helps students re-enroll by introducing them to the staff contact who will manage their re-entry. Staff members who meet students before they withdraw better understand the issues facing each student and can direct them to the most appropriate resources (counseling services, financial aid, etc.) when they return to campus. Contacts note that since implementing this system last fall, of the 240 students who withdrew in the fall semester, 68 returned the subsequent semester (a 28 percent return rate).

Offices that Process Student Withdrawal Should Ensure that Counselors are Always Available to Meet with Students

The dean of student's office at **University B** employs seven counselors who meet with students who intend to withdraw. Counselors are trained to address many issues including health, academic, and career-related problems. Each day, two counselors are each assigned one half-day to accept walk-in students (which includes students who intend to withdraw). The office of retention at **University C** ensures that either the director or assistant director for retention is available to meet with walk-in students considering withdrawal from the institution. All members of the office of retention have training in counseling students.