

Ask the Expert: **Teresa Farnum**

Hobsons staff sat down with Teresa Farnum, president of Teresa Farnum and Associates, to get expert answers to our questions about at-risk students.

Q & A



Q **Hobsons:** What is an at-risk student?

TF: An at-risk student is typically defined as having characteristics that may predict:

- Academic challenges or boredom
- Motivational issues
- Need for support

These will result in poor academic performance, college adjustment difficulties, and a need for changes in behaviors to succeed...and therefore the students are at risk of not returning and graduating.

There are many cognitive and affective traits that can be involved—some are typical, and some are unique to the institution.

Q **Hobsons:** What can colleges and universities do to identify at-risk students?

TF: It is critical that institutions understand who their at-risk students are—and sometimes that can be surprising. The at-risk students must be defined by a data-driven initiative; otherwise support for success will not be as strategic, and therefore effective, as needed. The best way to get this “snapshot” of students is through the creation of a comprehensive data analysis. The best process follows a path like this:

- Administer a survey of self-reported attributes in perceived difficulties in areas known to be important in success and retention (time management, support from families, math skills, finances, etc.). These data are used to determine the affective characteristics that may be barriers to success.
- Put together these results with all the data gleaned from pre-enrollment history. Look at all the thousands of combinations of data against the dependent variable of retention and determine the combination of variables that best predict retention. This is called predictive modeling.
- Score your new students against this model and get a probability score (say in deciles) for each student not being retained.
- Be prepared with programming to serve those at-risk students the moment they start classes.

Q **Hobsons:** How can school administration and faculty work with at-risk students to ensure graduation?

TF: Develop strategies specifically targeted toward the characteristics that predict attrition. A few examples might include:

Characteristic	Strategy
High achiever (yes—they can be at-risk!)	Ensure an effective honors program is in place and there is early outreach to them
Self-reported fear of math	Immediate, targeted outreach to diagnose deficiencies and advise on remediation programs that have been developed for this
Self-reported financial challenges	Immediate, targeted outreach to assist in structured financial planning
All at-risk students	Mentoring/coaching that is personal, regular, and intrusive

“ Over the past **15** years average **national retention and graduation rates** have remained the **same**. ”

Q **Hobsons:** How has the higher education experience changed over time, and how does this affect graduation rates?

TF: There is a great deal more attention to the experience of enrolled students and retention and graduation. Despite this, over the past 15 years average national retention and graduation rates have remained the same. That said, averages can hide the fact that many institutions are having tremendous success when they become more focused on student learning, success, and satisfaction...the components of increasing student retention. Some of the changes in higher education involve the following topics that may be mitigating against the work of institutions:

- Affordability
- Millennials and their needs
- Adults—increasing enrollment and special needs
- Underpreparedness
- Increases in stop-out behavior
- Customer service and understaffing
- Keeping up with technology and using it effectively
- Decrease in full-time faculty, who know the institution, instructing first-year classes

Q **Hobsons:** What part does family play in keeping an at-risk student on track?

TF: Particularly with millennials and families of adults who are returning to education, it is critical that the family provide support and motivation for students struggling to succeed and overcome the barriers they are encountering. Colleges and universities are well advised to engage families in the life of the institution to ensure that they are allies in programming and use of support resources.

Q **Hobsons:** What is the best communication method to keep in touch with today's student, and how can schools use this to make contact?

TF: There are many ways to communicate. The key is to use multiple means, systematize the communication, and use technology to simplify the process. “We told them (students) at orientation so they should know” does not cut it. The communications, whether e-mail to college or preferred address, instant messaging, postcards home (so that families can also see the message), phone calls, among other unique communication initiatives are all important. And don't forget the benefit of personal, one-on-one relationships developed through good mentoring and coaching programs. What will make this work is the tracking and ease of messaging through technology, and remembering that “they don't ‘hear’ the message until we are sick of saying it.”

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