

How to improve your freshman retention rate

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Incoming college students can develop a sense of fitting in before they even walk into class, and that feeling is important down the line to bolster student retention, according to a study by Michigan State University researchers. Credit: Michigan State University

Incoming college students who already feel a connection to their institution are more likely to fit in and want to remain at the school, especially if they are ethnic minorities, indicates a new study by Michigan State University researchers.

The findings, published online in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, suggest colleges and universities should focus on fostering these student connections through summer transition programs and other targeted efforts for soon-to-be freshmen. The retention rate for first-year students in the United States is about 68 percent, meaning more than 3 of 10 do not return their sophomore year, according to a [report by ACT](#). At MSU, about 90 percent of freshmen return their second year.

"We found that students can develop a sense of fitting in before they even walk into class and that feeling is important down the line. It leads to the students feeling like their skills meet academic demands and also leads to them wanting to stick around," said Joshua Prasad, lead author of the MSU study and a master's student in the Department of Psychology.

"For universities that are looking to foster a diverse student body," Prasad added, "this is an avenue they can actually act on. They can use that summer before students first come to campus to help develop that sense of fitting in."

Prasad and his fellow MSU researchers surveyed 1,935 students attending orientation at MSU. Survey items related to fitting in included, "I feel that I am a good match for the academic programs at this university," "I think I could view this university as my home during my undergraduate years" and "How many of your friends have attended or will attend this university?"

The students also were surveyed at the end of their first semester. According to the study, those who had felt a connection during orientation were much more likely to believe they were fitting in and interested in remaining at the university. Prasad called this a surprisingly strong finding.

Ethnic minority students were less likely to feel a connection to the university during orientation. The study notes that the concept of cultural mistrust has been used to describe how an oppressive past has shaped the attitudes of many African-Americans, creating a sense of skepticism toward predominately white universities and other institutions.

Ethnic minorities who did feel a connection during orientation, however, had a stronger link to feelings of fitting in and wanting to remain at the university after one semester.

The study also measured students' determination and grit, or the ability to persevere in the face of setbacks. Students who were high in these measures during orientation were more likely to perform well academically in their first semester, regardless of their high school grades and SAT scores.

"The practical implication here," said Prasad, "is that universities that rely solely on the standard metrics of academic success for new students, such as grade point average and entrance exam scores, might be missing out on the very important individual factors of motivation and determination."

Like all large public universities, Michigan State, which admits close to 8,000 freshmen a year, faces the challenges of serving a greater variety of students than ever before, in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic status and academic background, said R. Sekhar Chivukula, associate provost for undergraduate education.

To serve such a large and diverse student body, MSU has created a unique "neighborhood" student success collaborative in its residence halls. The neighborhoods bring together support staff from across the university - from student affairs and residence hall staff, to advisors and health professionals - to work collaboratively to create a comprehensive

web of support.

"These cross-disciplinary teams specifically work together to address the issues of belonging and identity, which often prevent ethnic and minority [students](#) from persisting in their undergraduate programs," said Chivukula.

Provided by Michigan State University

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