

# IMPROVING RETENTION AND GRADUATION RATES OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

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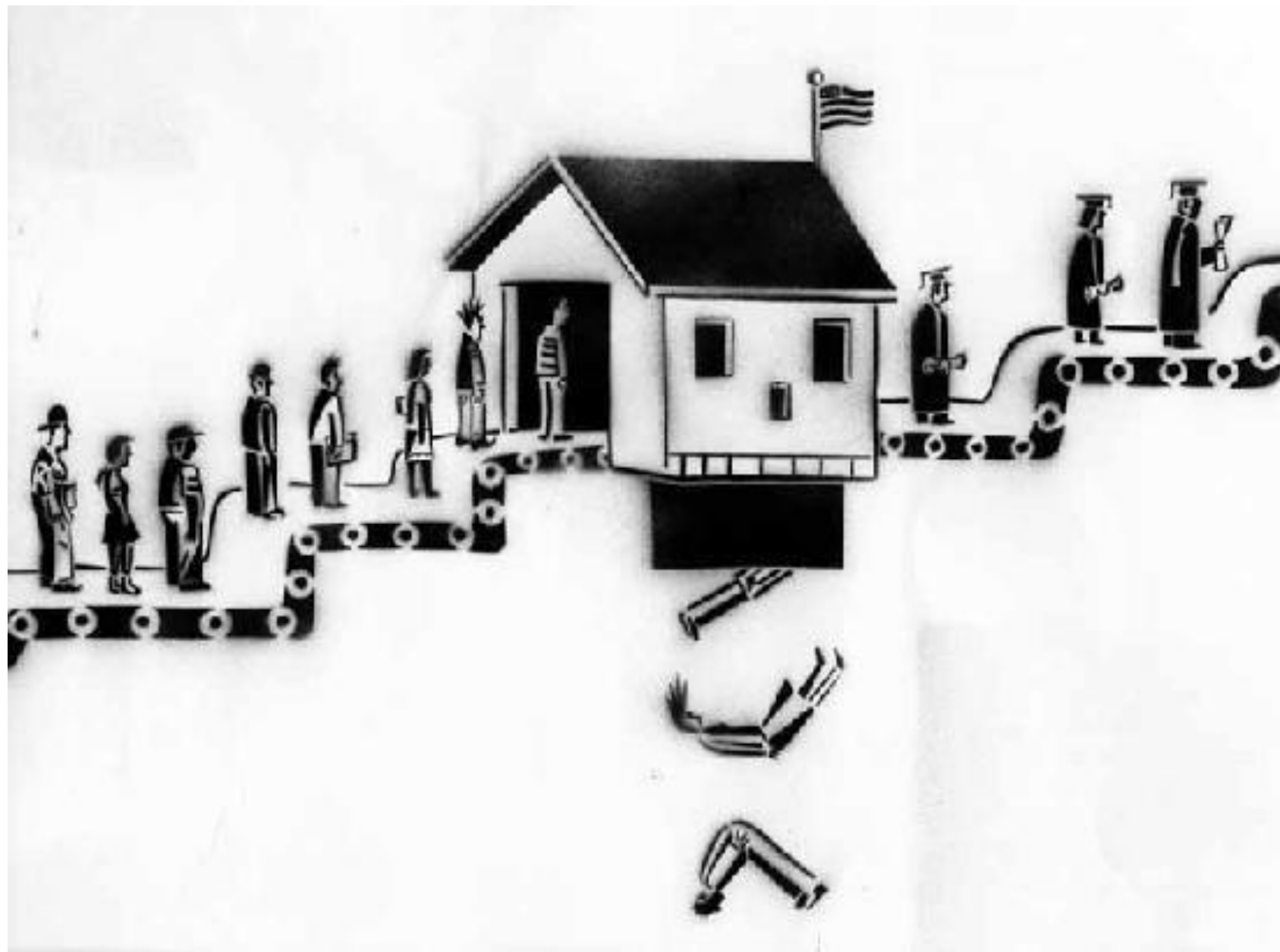
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Research that Matters



# Public Universities Are Not Alike

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- Universities tend to serve a traditional student body
- Location affects this -- urban campuses serve more commuter students, and rural campuses serve more residential students
- Size and selectivity vary

# Public Universities are Unique

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- State universities are in a strong position to work with high schools to make sure curriculum standards are consistent between high school and college classes
- Universities can do more to help fix the pipeline than most institutions

# Student View

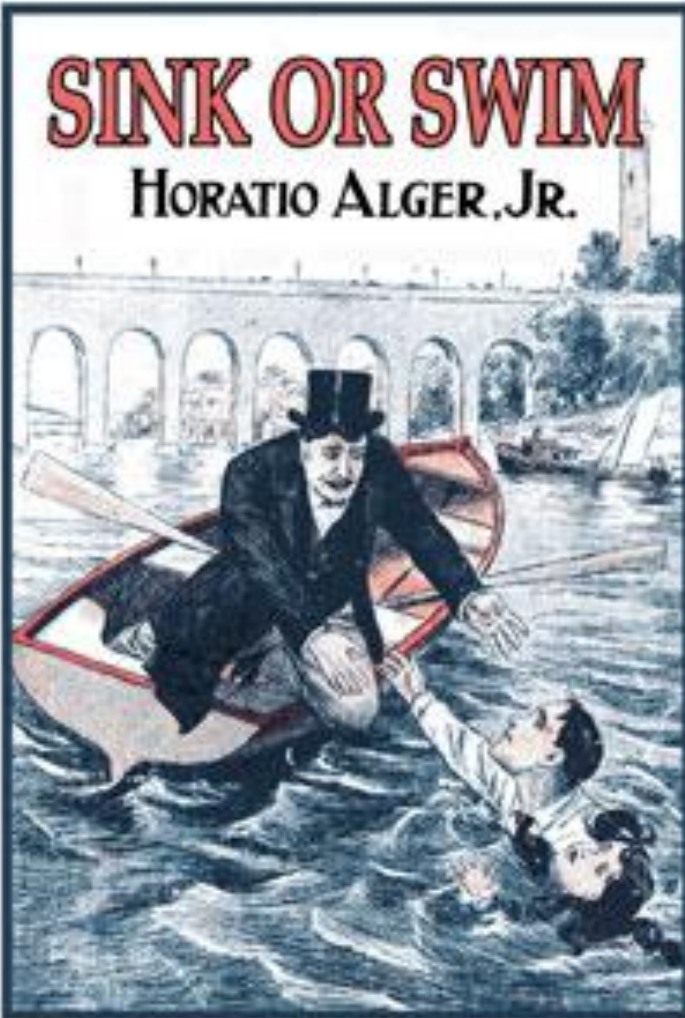
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- Students believe that their success is due to their own effort
- They do not always recognize the structural and programmatic issues that help them or hinder them
- The sense that student aid is inadequate is the exception to this rule

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# SINK OR SWIM

HORATIO ALGER, JR.



STREET & SMITH, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

# A Statement of What Should be

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Lotkowski, Robbins and Noeth, *The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention*,  
ACT Policy Report 2004

# What Should Universities Do?

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- Determine student characteristics and needs
- Set priorities among these areas of need
- Identify available resources
- Evaluate a variety of successful programs
- Implement a formal, comprehensive retention program that best meets institutional needs

# What Should Universities Do?

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- Use an integrated approach to retention efforts -- one that incorporates both academic and non-academic factors in the design and development of programs
- Create a socially inclusive and supportive academic environment that addresses the social, emotional, and academic needs of students

# What Should Universities Do?

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- Implement an early alert, assessment, and monitoring system based on:
  - ▣ Assessment scores
  - ▣ Course placement tests
  - ▣ First semester college GPA
  - ▣ Socioeconomic information
  - ▣ Attendance records
  - ▣ Non-academic information derived from formal surveys and student inventories
- Identify and build comprehensive profiles of students at risk of dropping out.

# What Should Universities Do?

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- Determine the economic impact of university retention programs and time to degree completion rates
- Use a cost-benefit analysis of student dropout, persistence, assessment procedures, and intervention strategies to enable informed decision-making for each type of intervention—academic and non-academic, including remediation and financial support

# Why Is This So Difficult to Do?

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# Mission Conflict

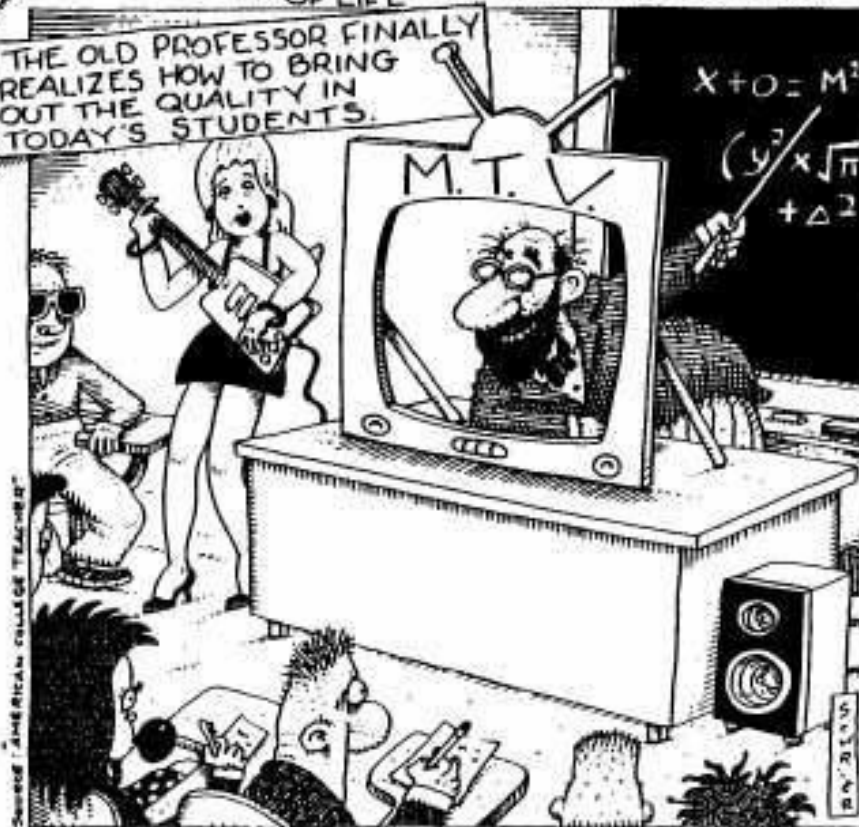
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- Public universities are torn between an impulse toward excellence that leads to an emphasis on research and tighter admission standards, and providing access to a broad range of students
- Faculty may perceive efforts to improve retention as an attack on standards

# FACTS

OF LIFE By Jim Lubetkin & Fred Schrier

THE OLD PROFESSOR FINALLY  
REALIZES HOW TO BRING  
OUT THE QUALITY IN  
TODAY'S STUDENTS.



35,000 COLLEGE PROFS WERE ASKED:  
"WHAT'S MOST SATISFYING ABOUT YOUR  
JOB?" RANKED FIRST: INDEPENDENCE.  
LAST: STUDENTS-- ONLY 38% WERE  
SATISFIED WITH STUDENT QUALITY.

**AHAJOKES.COM**

# Structural Problems

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- Universities are federations with a central government overseeing semi-autonomous colleges/schools
- The bigger the university, the less attention is paid to student persistence at the top levels of the administration
- This lack of attention makes it difficult to institutionalize a consistent approach to improving student persistence

# No Coordination Among Offices

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- Efforts to improve persistence are often program-specific and depend, in many cases, on available extra funding
- The programs are often aimed at helping minority and/or low-income students, or students with physical or learning handicaps

# Flying Blind

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- Universities do not systematically use data to track their students and determine the areas in which they have problems
- Universities depend on special studies or occasional reports to evaluate their overall success

# Incentives Change

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- External factors influence the amount of attention persistence receives. These issues include:
  - ▣ Changes in state support and policies
  - ▣ External accountability requirements
  - ▣ Number of student applications

# Finances Matter

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- Low- and middle-income students work a great deal while they attend the university
- Faculty members believe this affects these students' work
- It is not evident that more aid would put an end to this problem

# Academics Are at the Core

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- With some exceptions, most students do not work very hard in their classes. They have spotty class attendance and do not do much homework outside of class
- If engagement is a key to persistence, this lack of academic engagement may be an important avenue to explore
- Faculty should demand more of students



**no time to do  
your own research ?**

**the answer to  
effortless  
research**

**If your professor can have  
a research assistant  
why can't you?**

# Most Universities Have the Services

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- ❑ Pre-enrollment orientation or summer bridge programs do not always work for low-income students because they cannot afford to take time away from their summer jobs
- ❑ Last to apply for aid are often the highest-risk students
- ❑ Students are required to take proactive steps to solve their problems
- ❑ University does not have outreach programs or a case worker approach to help students solve problems that fall outside of the mainstream

# Most Frequently-Used Practices (ACT)

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- Academic Clubs 93%
- Pre-enrollment Orientation 92
- Individual Career Counseling 92
- Recreation/Intramurals 92
- Internships 91
- Cultural Activities Program 91

# Most Frequently-Used Practices (ACT)

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- Tutoring Program 87%
- Career Development Workshops 87
- Instructional Use of Technology 86
- Residence Hall Programs 86
- Writing Center/Lab 81
- Honors Programs 81

# Most Frequently-Used Practices (ACT)

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- Classroom Assessment 78%
- Programs for Racial/Ethnic Minorities 78
- Computer-assisted Career Guidance 77
- Mandated Course Placement Testing 77

# Least Frequently-Used Approaches (ACT)

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□ Community Member Mentoring	8%
□ Fresh Seminar/University 101	11
□ Degree Guarantee Program	13
□ Motivation Assessment	17

# Least Frequently-Used Approaches (ACT)

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□ Social Skills Course/Program	20%
□ Parent Advisory Group	24
□ Faculty Reward	24
□ Freshman Interest Groups	27
□ Assessing Student Performance	27
□ Advising and Life Planning	27
□ Motivation and Goal-Setting	28

# Programs that Distinguished High and Low Graduation Institutions (ACT)

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- Advising Interventions with Selected Students 26%
- Summer Bridge Program 20
- Course Placement Testing 20
- Contracts for Students in Difficulty 19
- Residence Hall Programs 19

# Programs that Distinguished High and Low Graduation Institutions (ACT)

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□ Extended Freshman Orientation	16%
□ Combine Advising/Counseling Career/Life Planning	13
□ Increased Advising Staff	10
□ Comprehensive Learning Center/Lab	10
□ Advising in First Year Transition	10
□ Freshman Seminar/University 101	10

# Success is Possible

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# Basic Principles

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- High expectations
  - Advice
  - Support
  - Involvement
  - Learning
- Vincent Tinto

# Making Persistence an Institutional Priority

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- Implement intentional academic planning
- Small classes
- Special programs for at-risk students
  - ▣ Ethnic/racial support
  - ▣ Handicapped/disabled
  - ▣ Commuter students
  - ▣ Older students

# Making Persistence an Institutional Priority

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- Provide appropriate developmental education
- Educational transition:
  - ▣ Ease entrance
  - ▣ Provide academic support
  - ▣ Summer bridge programs
- Develop an explicit retention policy

# Examples of Student Support

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- Provide financial aid for high achievers with financial need
- Make sure students apply for aid
- Have clear policies and rules, along with information on how to appeal awards

# Examples of Academic Support

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- Directive advising
- Linked classes
- Study groups
- Mentoring programs
- Freshman interest groups
- Block scheduling
- Learning communities

# Summary and Implications

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- There is no single answer to improving student persistence
- Each solution needs to be appropriate to the university and its students
- It is a systemic issue, which makes it hard for a federation such as the university to implement a solution
- Improving persistence must not reduce quality

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