

## The Data You Need

First, Adele advises that it's critical not to rely only on data on national trends. You need to establish a fairly precise picture of the characteristics and needs of your institution's specific population of underrepresented minority students.

To illustrate the point, Adele offers the scenarios of University A, a rural campus situated in an agricultural region, and University B, situated in a major urban center. Perhaps University A, in this case, has a smaller and less ethnically diverse academic community, and the institution finds that minority students entering its community are not struggling so much academically as they are having difficulty acclimating to the culture and the local environment. University B, on the other hand, has considerable ethnic diversity on its campus and students feel that they have more social support -- but they would value mentoring and other forms of academic support.

Here's where Adele suggests digging to identify the specific needs of your own students.

First, identify predictors of academic success and risk factors by examining your historical data for various student cohorts. If you have specific feeder schools from which you recruit many of your minority students, examine the profile of students you usually accept from each of those schools. Beyond the usual predictors (SAT scores, GPA, etc.), look at additional factors, such as access to certain levels of high school curriculum (for example, what is the highest level of math class offered by the feeder school?). For more information about some of the academic and non-academic factors to watch for, review our articles:

- ["Preparing First-Generation Students for Academic Success"](#) (July 2011)
- ["Identifying At-Risk Students: What Data are You Looking at?"](#) (February 2011)

Next, interview your *seniors*:

- What was their experience like transitioning into the institution?
- What difficulties did they run into in their first term?
- What (and who) helped them overcome those difficulties? What services made a difference in supporting their academic success?
- What was different in their second year?
- What recommendations would they have for how the school could make a difference in the academic and campus life experience of students like them?

"If you can get the right students to the table and get them talking," Adele says, "they can tell you what the problems are, from hindsight. They can tell you they ran into X problem in their first year, and it got better at this certain point, or it got worse. This is information you need."

## The Programs You Need

**Think intentionally about transitioning the students into your institution. This is where you can see the greatest impact.**

Goldie Adele, Southern Connecticut State University

Once you have a sound picture of your students' needs, Adele advises that some of the programs that are likely to have the greatest impact include:

- Inviting student leaders from your underrepresented minority population to serve as mentors during the transition to college; these peer leaders can connect new students with the campus resources (the writing center, the multicultural center, etc.) that they otherwise may not realize are available (for more information, see our article "[Boosting Retention for Ethnic Minority Students: Leveraging Peer Leadership](#)")
- A robust early alert and intervention program for your at-risk students
- Programs to improve financial literacy and financial aid awareness

Adele especially stresses the importance of educating minority (particularly first-generation minority) students about the need-based financial aid options available. This is more than just a matter of helping students ensure that they can afford all four years of their college education; persistent financial stress without clear guidance or knowledge on how to address it can degrade academic performance.

Adele suggests beginning to educate students about the financial aid options prior even to their arrival at your school. For example, send financial aid representatives along with your recruiters to feeder high schools. Besides helping those students who would otherwise assume that they are unable to afford a college education, ensuring that students understand the range of options (Pell Grant, federal and state aid, private scholarships, etc.) and how to apply for them will help you bring students into their first term at your institution as ready as possible financially, not just academically.

To learn more, please review our articles:

- [Tips for Outreach to Area High Schools](#) (October 2010)
- [Recruiting and Admitting First-Generation Students](#) (May 2011)

Beyond the first year, once students are declaring their majors, consider piloting programs to offer more focused academic support -- for example, a program for pairing juniors with faculty mentors who share their socioeconomic and/or ethnic background.

## **The People You Need**

The most critical people to involve in any retention initiative targeted at underrepresented student populations: the faculty.

**It's not enough just to provide tutoring or mentoring programs. Involving faculty is really key. Faculty are the first point of contact academically. They are the most likely to be aware of how students are doing in their classes.**

Goldie Adele, Southern Connecticut State University

"Most faculty mean well," Adele notes, "but they may lack the tools to address a situation where a minority student is at risk. They may be unsure how to approach minority students, how to structure that conversation, what steps to take. Also, faculty may not know the overall student profile of their campus, how that profile is changing recently, or the needs of this generation of the students."

To invite faculty to become more involved and aware, first approach department chairs and ask for their help. Then hold workshops to:

- Provide faculty with the data on how student demographics at your institution are changing
- Discuss the unique challenges faced by first-generation and minority students
- Give faculty opportunity to brainstorm with each other about appropriate ways to support these student cohorts
- Walk through sample scenarios and invite faculty to problem-solve

"Most of all," Adele suggests, "offer faculty a clear rationale for why you're asking for their help. Let them know that the students we had ten years ago and the students entering the institution now are not the same. Talk about the locations this class of students come from, their income bracket, their unique needs, and present the research that demonstrates all of this. Be very direct about the institution's goals for supporting and graduating minority students. Tell faculty about the resources and the plans for academic support that the institution has -- it's very important to approach faculty with a clear plan. Then ask for *their* suggestions. They are closest to the academic struggles the students are having; their input will be immensely valuable."

**Rather than just tell faculty "This is the plan, and this is your part in it," invite them into the big picture of the institution's plan for recruiting, retaining, and educating minority students ... and the reasons for it.**

Goldie Adele, Southern Connecticut State University

Source: <http://www.academicimpressions.com/news/boosting-retention-ethnic-minority-students-laying-groundwork>. Accessed July 30, 2013.