Revitalizing Student Success Efforts at Rochester University

Understanding student needs to build effective retention interventions

Debi Rutledge

Director of Academic Support and Retention

Introduction

Rochester University, an open enrollment liberal arts institution, serves a unique student population. In the Spring 2022 semester, 52% of students are traditional daytime students, 23% are dual-enrolled or in the early college program, 22% are accelerated evening and online students, and 3% are graduate or professional development students. This diversity of access points, although convenient for students, creates challenges for supporting persistence, retention, and degree completion. One of the key strategic initiatives in Rochester's strategic plan is to enrich the student experience and retention.

Challenges

For the last decade, first-time student retention at Rochester University has remained in the low to mid-60s. The university has set a goal of increasing retention by 7%. In 2015, to support retention efforts, the university created the SOS (Support Our Students) Committee. The committee is co-chaired by the Director of Student Success and Wellbeing and the Director of Academic Support and Retention and includes staff from the departments of residence life, advising, tutoring, admissions, athletics, enrollment management, and financial aid. The committee is charged with implementing student success initiatives. In the early years of the committee, the initiatives were not well utilized by students.
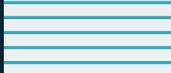
Solution

To increase the impact of the university's student success efforts, particularly the SOS Committee, Rochester implemented tools from Pharos Resources and iClicker Insights by Macmillan Learning to better understand the challenges students faced and how to support their needs. Both of these solutions are intended to help with retention:

iClicker Insights

The iClicker Insights solution, built by Macmillan Learning's Research and Analytics team, provides higher education institutions with an innovative, supplemental approach to student success. It contains a series of short surveys that cover key, non-cognitive issues such as sense of belonging, finances, and intent to return, as well as identification of classroom issues such as attendance, course struggles, and academic resilience.

Pharos Resources

Pharos Resources provides higher education institutions with a comprehensive approach to improve student outcomes. This relational retention software helps practitioners identify their struggling student population, manage student contact and progress with robust case management tools, build and strengthen campus partnerships, and measure success with intuitive dashboards and ad hoc reports.

Implementation

Rochester University partnered with iClicker Insights to make use of Macmillan Learning's 20+ years of deep research, guided consultation, and actionable insights. As an added bonus, the iClicker Insights survey data flows into Rochester's current implementation of the Pharos 360 platform for student success for quicker data analysis, connections to other data sources, and additional data analysis.

When Rochester first started using Pharos, the SOS committee would use meeting time to review cases and to brainstorm ways to support each student. The challenge with this approach was the overwhelming number of cases to review (as many as 400 per meeting). More recently, they have used the Pharos stoplight faculty surveys to help identify students who are struggling in their courses or not showing up to class. Cases are then assigned to individual staff members with the expectation that they contact the student within 24 hours of the alert. This approach helped them to better manage cases.

The integration of the iClicker Insights surveys took that approach to a new level by identifying factors that would never have surfaced without asking the students via the surveys. The SOS committee can now focus on "building a response system to use the data that we're collecting." The iClicker Insights survey data "has revitalized the SOS Team. We're really purpose-driven. We've done a lot of good work." said Debi Rutledge, Director of Academic Support and Retention.

Results

With the implementation of the iClicker Insights surveys, Rochester learned some key findings:

- Students struggling in at least one course is an indicator of risk.
- The second highest risk for attrition is a neutral or low sense of belonging.
- Students who did not respond to the surveys are at a higher risk of attrition.
- Students who missed a few classes or who missed class frequently were less likely to return.
- Students who felt a higher sense of belonging or said they attended all of their classes retained far above the 2020 average.

Although Rochester University is still in the early stages of integrating their use of Pharos and iClicker Insights, they have already experienced positive results. Fall 2021 to Spring 2022 persistence for First Time In College students was 81.88%, a 3.3% increase over last year. The SOS Committee plans to continue this momentum by doing more focused follow up with the Spring 2022 success survey in conjunction with increased support for students who receive stoplight survey reports from faculty members.

Since the launch of iClicker Insights surveys, the overall First Time Freshman persistence has increased substantially.

First-Time First Year Students Persistence Rates
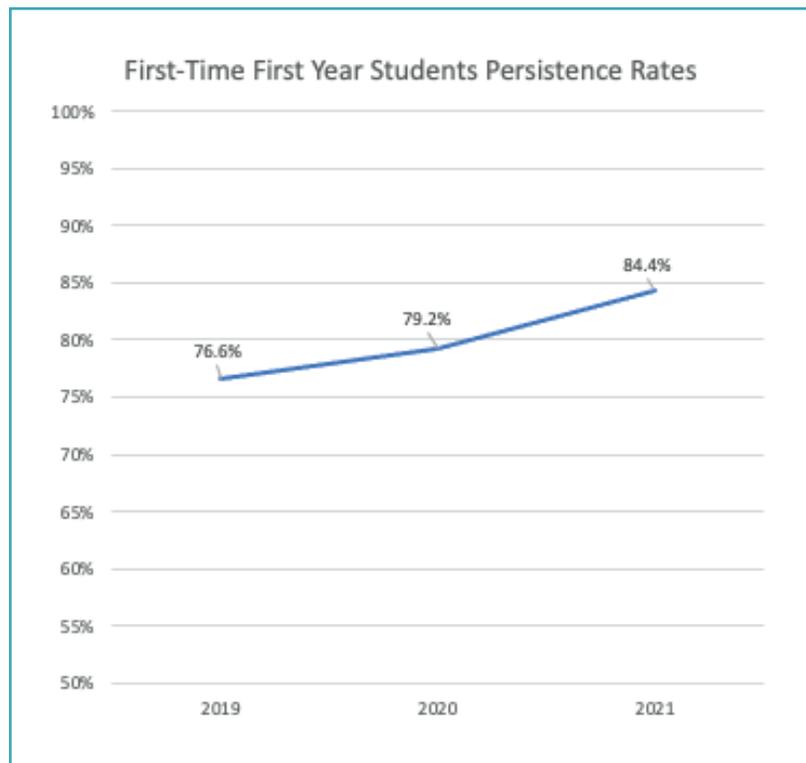
The First Time Freshman (FTF) 2021 cohort was the first year that combined iClicker Insights surveys with follow-ups from staff members. This 2021 cohort persisted at 8 percentage points higher than the 2019 cohort (pre-iClicker Insights survey). With 161 students in the FTF 21 cohort, this increase amounts to roughly 12 additional students staying at the university into Spring 2022.

In previous cohorts, female students have had lower persistence rates than male students and students of color have had lower persistence rates than white students. Females and students of color have both seen an increase in persistence since the launch of iClicker Insight surveys; however, there is still a persistence gap between students of color and white students.

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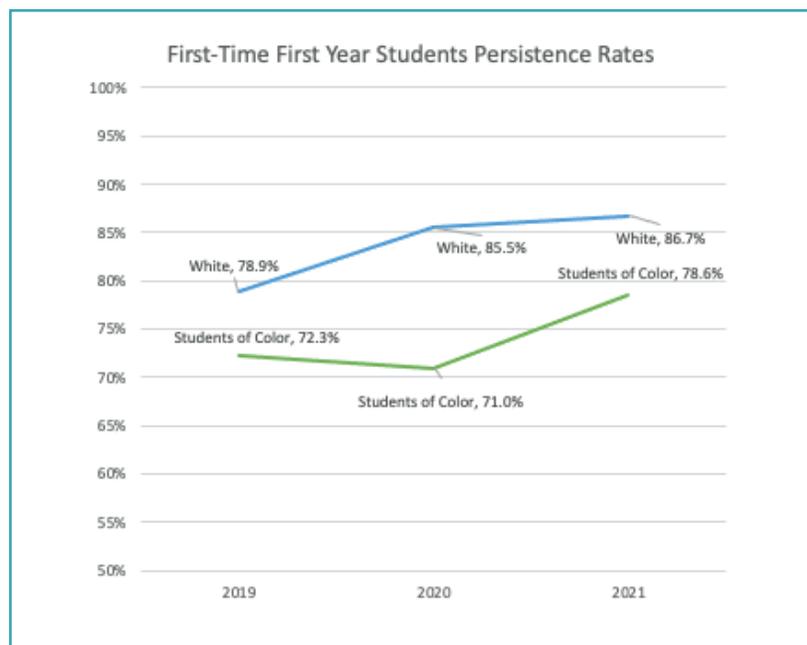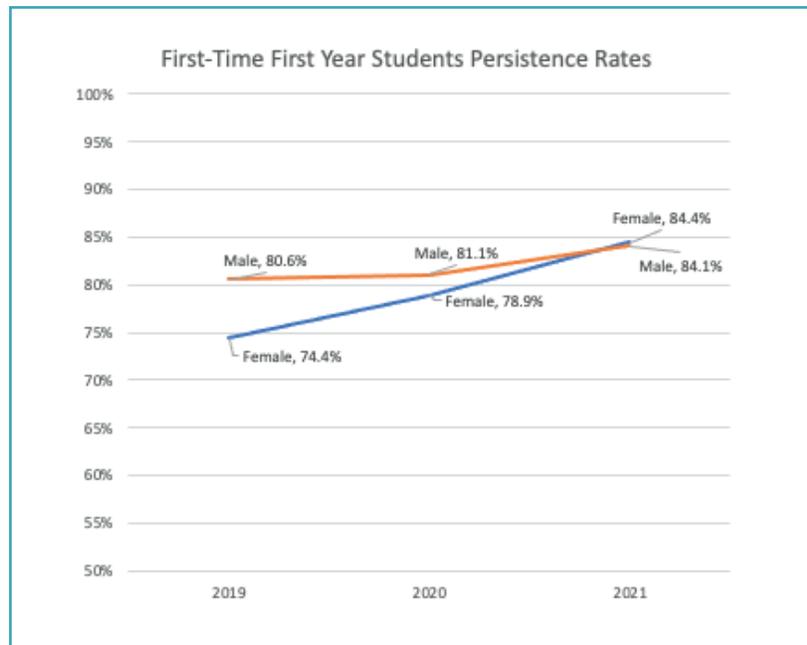
STUDENTS WITH PELL GRANTS

In Fall 2021, there was a 14% drop in retention rate for students with Pell grants. An even larger drop in retention (25%) came from students with *both* Pell grants and Opportunity Scholarships. It is important to note that the majority of students of color at Rochester University are in the Pell population.

The SOS committee used the iClicker Insights Fall 2021 Success survey results to identify students at risk of stopping out based on several key areas. SOS team members targeted students who reported struggling in courses, a low sense of belonging, financial struggles, health related stress due to COVID-19, or a low intent to return in the next academic term. A point person was designated for each area and based on the survey, approximately 400 student contacts were made by team members. Academic Adviser Teri Butcher described the impact her outreach had on one student, stating:

"It took several attempts to get a response from Bill, but when he finally reached out it was to request a meeting. He was struggling in many classes, close to failing due to his lack of follow-through as well as his many absences. The meeting was productive in that we came up with a plan of action so that this student could pass his classes. The plan included weekly check-in meetings with me, as well as some time management interventions. The student had several weeks to get back on track, but struggled with some non-academic issues that affected his motivation; our weekly meetings helped him to remain accountable to his plan. At the time of our first meeting this student was at risk of failing 4/5 of his courses; ultimately, he was able to pass four of his courses with a grade point average that was high enough to remain in good academic standing."

Debi Rutledge
Director of Academic Support and Retention

Debi Rutledge is the Director of Academic Support and Retention at Rochester University in Rochester, Hills, MIichigan. Debi holds a Master of Marriage and Family Therapy degree from Abilene Christian University. She has served in leadership roles in a variety of areas in Higher Education over the last thirty years including Admissions, Financial Services, Residence Life, and Advising. She assumed leadership of Academic Support and Retention in May of 2020 and has worked to increase Rochester University's retention using a three-pronged approach focusing on improved feedback from faculty, improved feedback from students, and improved follow-up that shifts the focus from transactional to transformational interactions.

iClicker Insights

iclicker.com/retention-surveys/

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