



Encouraging Sophomore Success

Four Components of Effective
Second-Year Retention Efforts

Academic Affairs Forum

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Introduction

What comes after the first-year experience?

Institutions are already investing in the first year because of pressure from state boards of regents, accreditors, and administrators to address the high rates of attrition among first-year students. Institutions have devoted significant resources to provide first-year students with the support and skills they need to adjust to university life. For example, enhanced first-year experience programs with new advising centers, living-learning communities, small-group seminars, and events and activities just for first-year students.

However, when the first year ends, sophomores suddenly lose the structured support network that provided academic and career advice, close connections with faculty, friendships and social connections, and a sense of identity. Sophomores are less likely to live on campus than first-year students. They are also less likely to be required to meet with their academic advisors. The end of the first year does not necessarily end a student's struggles transitioning to university life, such as homesickness or the development of effective study skills. Students still need support to be successful at the institution in their second year, and a significant portion of attrition happens during students' second year¹.

The Sophomore Gap

	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year
 Campus Support Structures	First-Year Experience programs Residence halls	???	Faculty advisor in academic division	Senior Week Graduate school advice Career center
 Intensive Curricular Engagement	First-year seminars University 101	???	Advanced major courses	Capstone course

Preparing for the upper division

Sophomores are also transitioning in their academic career from the structured curriculum of first-year general education requirements into increasingly independent course and major selection. Over the next two years, their academic division will become the center of their life on campus. However, many sophomores do not have a clear entry point to become familiar with upper-division coursework and faculty and create the lasting mentorship relationships that promote long-term success. They may also not have access to smaller, seminar-format classrooms where they have individualized faculty attention and a closer cohort of students to help them form social connections and campus engagement.

1) Sources: Bowen, W.G., M.M. Chingos, and M.S. McPherson. *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009; ACT Research, "2014 Retention/Completion Summary Tables," http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/14retain_trends.pdf

Four components of effective sophomore retention efforts

Institutions should account for both the narrowing support structures offered to students after the first year and the growing need for engagement with the faculty and curriculum in a student's planned major. Sophomores are more likely to persist beyond the second year if they have a branded sophomore identity, timely financial support, targeted faculty engagement opportunities, and declare their major by the end of the second year.



#1: Timely financial support

While first-year students receive assistance from high school admissions counselors to establish their aid, sophomores must be more independent in maintaining and renewing aid, which can be intimidating. During the first year, students may lose limited, one-year scholarships, or they may find that grants are sufficient to cover tuition but not the unexpected costs of attending college. Many of our members report that financial concerns are among the most common reasons why students drop out during the sophomore year.

Institutions should provide proactive attention to sophomores who struggle financially to help mitigate attrition during the second year. Students may not be aware of work-study or other financial opportunities on campus, and may have ignored the information if they did not need it in the first year, for example if first-year financial aid packages did not require work study. Progressive institutions have used several strategies to help sophomores who are unsure about their ability to continue funding their college education.

- **FAFSA renewal:** One in 10 Pell grant-eligible students do not renew their FAFSA forms after the first year, causing a 28% drop in persistence for these students². Proactively reaching out to students helps ensure they re-file and can access future aid opportunities.
 - University of Missouri staff made phone calls to Pell-eligible students to remind and assist them with FAFSA re-filing, ensuring each student had someone to walk them through the often-complex process.
 - Colorado State University resident assistants hand-deliver FAFSA renewal letters to eligible students, adding a personal touch and using resident assistants' frequent contact with students to ensure the message arrives.
- **Success grants:** Performance-based student scholarships provide financial support while incentivizing behaviors that promote timely graduation.
 - Temple State University's merit grants are contingent on completion of 30+ credit hours per year, regular advisor meetings, and setting and following a 4-year degree plan, guiding students receiving aid in developing specific, success-focused behaviors.
 - Indiana State University provides students with 6 free college credits over the summer and a \$300 textbook stipend to encourage more credit completion during the summer session, where federal aid is unavailable.

2) Source: Bird & Castleman, "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?: Investigating Rates and Patterns of Financial Aid Renewal Among College Freshmen," EdPolicyWorks Working Paper, May 2014; NCES, National Postsecondary Aid Survey (NPSAS), 2012; NCES, Digest of Education Statistics 2012, Table 5; NCES, Digest of Education Statistics 2014, Table 305.40.

#2: Branded sophomore identity

First-year students benefit from consistent class-specific programming, such as orientation and first-year seminars, especially as more institutions focus on first-year retention as a success metric. As juniors and seniors, students can more clearly associate with their major or special events such as graduation or senior week. The sophomore year lacks a specific identity that promotes on-campus engagement.

Research shows that students are more likely to return in their junior year if they are socially integrated into campus and take part in co-curricular activities³. Institutions can market opportunities like career development, social events, residential housing, and community service directly to sophomores. Targeting sophomore students with these opportunities creates continuity with the structure these students experienced in their first year and offers specific engagement opportunities for sophomores. Many institutions are already offering co-curricular programs open to all four years of students, so it is often only a matter of rethinking how to market these programs specifically to sophomores.

Sophomore class programming

- **Sophomore orientation:** Welcome activities for returning and transfer students set a positive tone for the second year and help students feel at home at the institution.
 - [University of Illinois-Springfield's Welcome Back Week](#) and [Mount Holyoke University's Sophomore Re-Orientation](#) build engagement and identity early on by starting the sophomore year with shared experiences and learning outcomes for students.
- **Sophomore living-learning communities:** Themed residential housing is open only to sophomores who enroll in an exclusive section of at least one course while participating in related co-curricular activities. Sophomores in learning communities are encouraged to develop friendships with each other and develop study skills that will help them in the upper division.
 - [Babson College Sophomore Leadership LLC](#) encourages sophomores to think of themselves as leaders and plan for the long term around their entrepreneurial, philanthropic, or wellness interests.
 - [University of Richmond Sophomore Scholars in Residence](#) comprises a group of small, close-knit learning communities with co-curricular components that motivate students in long-term planning by showing the real-world impact of their classroom learning.
 - [Appalachian State University's Sophomore Year Experience LLC](#) brings career and major preparation directly to students in their residence halls, keeping it front-of-mind and improving access to resources.
- **Career and community activities:** Events throughout the year build engagement, keeping sophomores involved on campus and in the surrounding area while offering skill-building opportunities that contribute to career development.
 - [Northern Illinois University Sophomore Days of Service](#) and [Colorado State University's Alternative Spring Break](#) both provide sophomores with a service opportunity that helps students feel a sense of greater community involvement and build social connections with their peers.

Program-specific year-by-year maps

As sophomores consider major and career choices, four-year maps matching co-curricular opportunities to students' interests help them create a cohesive, goal-oriented experience for the second year and beyond.

- Major maps at [Georgia State University](#) and [Queen's University](#) provide year-by-year outlines of what students can do in and outside of the classroom to prepare for future careers.

3) Source: Catherine L. Coghlan, Jessica Fowler, & Matthew Messl, "The Sophomore Experience: Identifying Factors Related to Second-Year Attrition," *Proceedings of the 5th Annual National Symposium on Student Retention*, 2009.
https://studentsuccess.unc.edu/files/2012/11/Proceedings_of_the_NSSR-2009.pdf

#3: Targeted faculty engagement opportunities

Commitment to an academic major and meaningful interaction with faculty and staff are both significant predictors of academic success in the sophomore year and key factors influencing retention⁴. The sophomore class is the only class that does not benefit from the more interactive, supportive environment of a seminar-format classroom, with close ties to their academic interests. Through targeted opportunities for interaction, faculty and staff can familiarize sophomores with their future programs of study, help students find co-curricular and career opportunities, and motivate them to succeed.

Research shows that personal connections with faculty are an important factor in year-to-year retention and in quality of life after graduation⁵. Targeted engagement opportunities for sophomores help students feel more comfortable reaching out and making those connections as they move into a major.

Students benefit from the ability to hear personal stories about faculty's academic and career paths; examples of how they learned from hardship, failure, or uncertainty; and the positive aspects of conducting academic or professional work in their program of study. Furthermore, small class sizes allow sophomores to benefit from a close-knit cohort of classmates and the individualized attention of a faculty instructor.

- **Sophomore experience seminars:** Students take courses and participate in small-group co-curricular activities—such as field trips and long-term projects—as an early introduction to the type of work they will be doing in their junior and senior years.
 - [Stanford University's Sophomore College](#) provides a comprehensive, structured sophomore seminar program with a sense of prestige that attracts students to participate.
- **Sophomore electives:** Faculty-led seminars taught at a survey level in specialized topics provide a chance for sophomores to explore topics that interest them outside of the high-pressure environment of required prerequisites.
 - The [University of California-Berkeley's Seminars for Sophomores](#) are small courses open to all sophomores with interest in the subject areas, regardless of experience level.
- **Faculty panels for sophomores:** Panel Q&A sessions where faculty talk about their career paths help students get to know the faculty they will interact with in their junior year and beyond and can have the added benefit of motivating students to persist in the face of failure.
 - [Colorado State University True Faculty Story Dinners](#) match students with faculty based on major interests or demographics and help students relate to faculty as potential long-term mentors.

#4: Best-fit major declaration

Second-year major declaration helps ensure students stay on track to graduate⁶ and select appropriate prerequisite requirements and sequenced courses. Advisors should proactively reach out to sophomores who have not declared a major or were not admitted to a selective major program and work closely on degree mapping and interest inventorying. Ideally, students will be prepared to remain in the majors that they declare in their sophomore year.

- **Career self-exploration resources:** Online resources help students identify their career interests and match them to a relevant major; encouraging students to self-reflect and plan ahead.
 - [Florida State University's STEPS Program](#) provides a structured process for career exploration and a central hub for interest inventory surveys and major matching.

4) Source: Graunke, S. S. and Woosley, S. A. (2005). An exploration of the factors that affect the academic success of college sophomores. *College Student Journal*, 39(2), 367-376.

5) Source: "The 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index Report," Lumina Foundation (2014).

6) "Student Flow Analysis: CSU Students Progress Toward Graduation" *Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy* (2009)

- **Cluster advising:** Assigning advisors to an interest area or group of majors where there is frequent migration (for instance, nursing, biology, and public health) smooths the transition between majors and helps advisors take a more holistic view of students' potential degree paths.
 - Virginia Tech [centralized its Life Sciences advising](#) to provide consistent advice and promote streamlined transitions between related majors, without incentives to retain students in any one major.
 - The University of Texas-San Antonio extended [the advising center model](#) to all students, using historical major migration data to predict how to assign students a consistent advisor for all four years.
- **Alternative pathways:** Many students have clear career goals but still struggle with major declaration when rejected from limited-capacity programs like nursing and engineering. Progressive institutions are beginning to develop alternative pre-professional majors that accept prerequisite credits from these programs so students can stay on track to graduate.
 - The [University of Missouri's Bachelor of Health Sciences program](#) provides an easy pathway for students who do not meet nursing program requirements and a still-rigorous alternative major relevant to their interests.

Conclusion

As students progress into the second year from the more structured environment of the first, administrators can support them through targeted curricular and co-curricular programming, proactive financial aid, and academic advising focused on long-term planning. These efforts can reduce second-year attrition and help students build the stronger connections with faculty, peers, and programs of study, and create momentum toward second-year major declaration. By the end of their sophomore year, students will enter the upper division fully prepared and ready to continue their path to graduation.