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Student Success Staffing in a Volatile Labor Market

Six Strategies for Solving Your Most Urgent Workforce Challenges

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Introduction

Adjusting to an Era of Shortage

A Nationwide Staffing Crisis

Student-facing teams hit hard

It is, by now, common knowledge that the nation's employers are seeing record numbers of staff resignations and unprecedented competition for prospective hires.

Less widely appreciated is the fact that student-facing teams have been hit especially hard. "Student-facing" refers to professional advisors, admissions counselors, financial aid officers, and many other student support roles. In research interviews undertaken for this report, most administrators reported seeing sudden and unexpected increases in staff departures as well as a severe contraction in their pipelines of prospective hires. It was not uncommon for us to hear of teams going months with more than a third of their positions vacant.

Many of these positions were eventually refilled across 2021, but leaders should anticipate that high rates of turnover will continue for the next few years.

Dire consequences

The conditions described above have, predictably, led to serious knock-on effects, including increased stress for remaining staff, decreasing morale, increased quit rates, and falling student outcomes.

Employee Turnover in Higher Education
Percentage change in total employees, seasonally adjusted

+10% growth in 2021

−11% decline in 2020

With more to come

280%
increase in job postings from Mar '20 to May '22

6M
Estimated decline in US working-age population by 2028

NASFAA Survey Shows Troubling Vital Stats for Financial Aid Teams

56%
Concerned over their ability to meet the needs of students given current staffing levels

43%
Report a high degree of difficulty filling open positions with qualified staff

39%
Unable to remain compliant with Education Department administrative-capability requirements

Factors Driving the Crisis

Crucial context

Part of developing an effective response to staff recruitment and retention challenges is understanding the larger trends causing labor-market volatility.

A confluence of forces

While no one can say for sure how much of the current state of affairs is attributable to any particular factor, all of the considerations listed at right play an important role.

The picture here is one of additive impact from multiple causes. For example, the pandemic coincided with remote-work technologies becoming more or less perfected, which led to a large segment of the nation's workforce being introduced to the possibilities of flexible work—and, in many cases, developing a strong preference for it.

An important additional consideration is that the factors shown at right do not impact all industries in the same way. This report explains the particular challenges and opportunities they present for student-facing teams.

Accounting for Your Vanishing Workforce

Remote work has created a national marketplace for labor

+

The number of working-age people in the United States is shrinking — Projected deficit of 6 million workers nationally by 2028

+

Employees developed a taste for flexible work during the pandemic

+

Higher ed lags industry on compensation and flexible work

+

Downward spiral of worsening work conditions and staff resignations

Source: EAB research and analysis.

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A Root-Cause Perspective

What's the problem?

When talking about solutions to the staffing crisis, it is helpful to be clear about what, exactly, the problem is we're looking to solve.

Understaffing results in more work to do than you have capacity for, which, in turn, leads to suboptimal student outcomes. However, as illustrated at right, it is not the only factor that can lead to your team being overworked. Inefficiency, for example, can cause an otherwise appropriate complement of staff to be unable to complete essential tasks.

Tackling adjacent concerns

Disaggregating overwork into its root causes identifies additional measures administrators can take, over and above those explicitly targeting staff recruitment and retention, to address the worst consequences of understaffing. Not incidentally, this expanded perspective helps address some of the key causes of staff resignations, thereby indirectly addressing the understaffing problem itself.

Identifying Areas of Focus for Potential Solutions

Staffing Shortfalls in Context

Too much work ┈┈┈▶ Staff burnout, increased resignations, compromised student outcomes…

Not enough staff

Inefficient use of existing staff

High quit rate

Inability to fill open positions

Time spent on unimpactful activities

Staff and activities mismatched

Suboptimal execution on impactful activities

This report covers solutions to these problems

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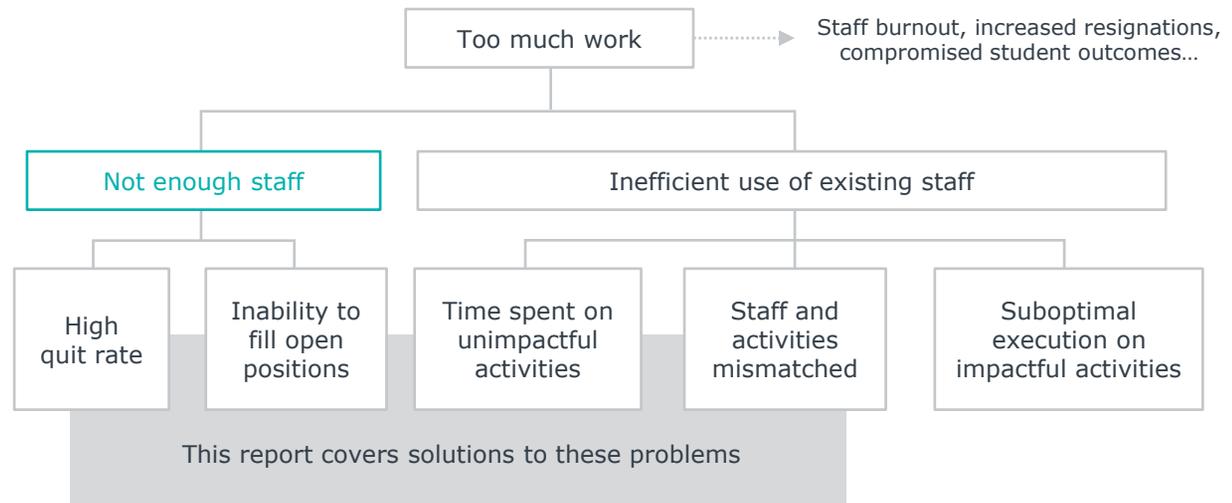
A Solution-Categories Perspective

An organized response

One of the simpler ways of understanding the universe of potential solutions to staffing challenges is taxonomically, by category. As shown at right, they can be grouped under six main headings, each of which acts on the two main determinants of staffing levels—recruitment and retention—in different ways.

Overlapping impact

Note that three of the categories—maximizing flexible work options, ensuring appropriate compensation, and optimizing your organizational structure—help with both recruitment and retention.

Note as well that the first category, cutting your staff's workload down to size, not only improves retention—it also boosts the efficacy of your existing staff, thereby directly elevating your student outcomes.

Six Categories of Solutions Covered in This Report

These categories correspond to the sections of this white paper

		Problems addressed	
		Recruitment	Retention
1	Cut your staff's workload down to size		✓
2	Maximize flexible work options	✓	✓
3	Ensure appropriate compensation	✓	✓
4	Create an engaging work environment		✓
5	Ramp up staff recruitment	✓	
6	Optimize your org structure	✓	✓

Source: EAB research and analysis.

A Timeline and Prioritization Perspective

Focus on Immediate Fixes, with an Eye to Longer-Term Solutions

These two pages offer a framework for implementing the solutions covered in this white paper, based on sequence and timing—things you can do right away for immediate impact and efforts that span the medium and long term (6+ and 12+ months, respectively). Note that some of the six solution categories covered in the white paper (e.g., ensuring appropriate compensation) span two or three of the timeline categories shown below, meaning that there are opportunities to inflect your performance in them immediately, even as you're initiating work aimed at producing additional impact down the road.

1

Actions to take right away

- Cut the least productive activities from your staff's workload
  See pages 17–18

- Maximize flexible-work options
  See pages 19–23

- Intensify morale-building efforts
  See pages 31–35

- Deploy recruitment and retention bonuses
  See page 29

- Revise copy used in job postings and other staff-recruitment communications
  See pages 37–39

- Take the initiative in sourcing candidates
  See page 37

Approaches that take longer to implement and/or to produce results

2

6-month-plus initiatives

- Lobby your organization for higher pay
  See pages 26-28

- Build out a more robust recruitment infrastructure, including web-based resources
  See page 38

- Establish partnerships required to maximize the impact of your tuition-remission benefit
  See page 44

- Increase options for staff specialization and skills development
  See pages 43 and 50

3

12-month-plus initiatives

- Implement retention strategies targeting senior staff
  See pages 46–47

- Beef up your sub-entry-level ranks
  See page 48

- Implement improved career paths
  See page 49

Source: EAB research and analysis.

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A Legacy of the Recent Buyers' Market for Labor

The current moment in context

The preceding pages offered three frameworks for understanding and organizing your response to staffing shortages. This page presents some additional reflections on the likely readiness of student-facing teams to do that difficult work, by way of a look at the recent history of voluntary staff departures in the United States.

Sudden impetus

As shown in the chart at right, the early 2010s saw quit rates drop to historic lows.

One consequence of this trend was reduced pressure on employers to retain staff. Relatedly, many administrators interviewed for this white paper also reported seeing a surplus of candidates for positions during the same time frame—a state of affairs that led some institutions' staff recruitment and retention capabilities to atrophy.

Whatever resulting complacency may have gripped employers in the 2010s ended abruptly with the spike of job-leaving in 2021.

Monthly Job-Leaving Rate[1]

Rates Shown Are for August of Each Year

A period of abnormally low quit rates

142% proportional increase vs. 2009

Average 2001-2020 = 1.93%
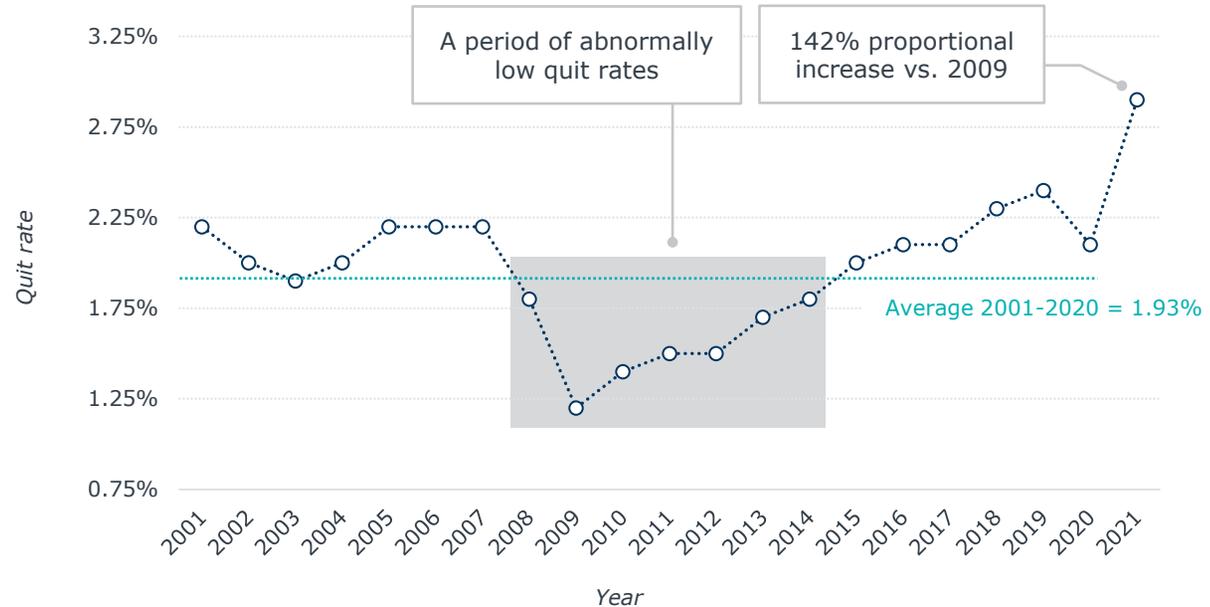
1) Seasonally adjusted rate, all United States non-farmworkers.

Source: Eli Rosenberg, "4.3 million Americans left their jobs in December as omicron variant disrupted everything," *The Washington Post*, February 1, 2022; "Quits rate of 2.9 percent in August 2021 an all-time high," Bureau of Labor Statistics, October 18, 2021; EAB analysis.

Understanding What Your Staff Members Want

An extensively researched question

The foundation of any effort to improve staff recruitment and retention must be a clear and comprehensive understanding of what workers want.

Thankfully, this question is researched intensively by government agencies and an industry of consultants and survey-research firms, which often make the findings of their research available online. Shown on this page are two examples.

A local perspective

Note that while broad, national, cross-industry data such as this is helpful, it is also important to factor in differences that exist across demographics, job types, etc. The concerns of your senior staff will, after all, likely differ markedly from those of blue-collar service-industry workers. Differences such as these are masked in aggregate data such as that shown here.

One of the best ways to address that gap is also the simplest—ask your staff what matters most to them.

Which Benefits Matter Most to Prospective Employees?

Percentage of Surveyed Individuals Identifying Benefit as Having the "Most Influence," by Age (Fortune)

Legend:
- Gen Z (18-24)
- Millennials (25-40)
- Gen X (41-56)
- Boomer + (57+)
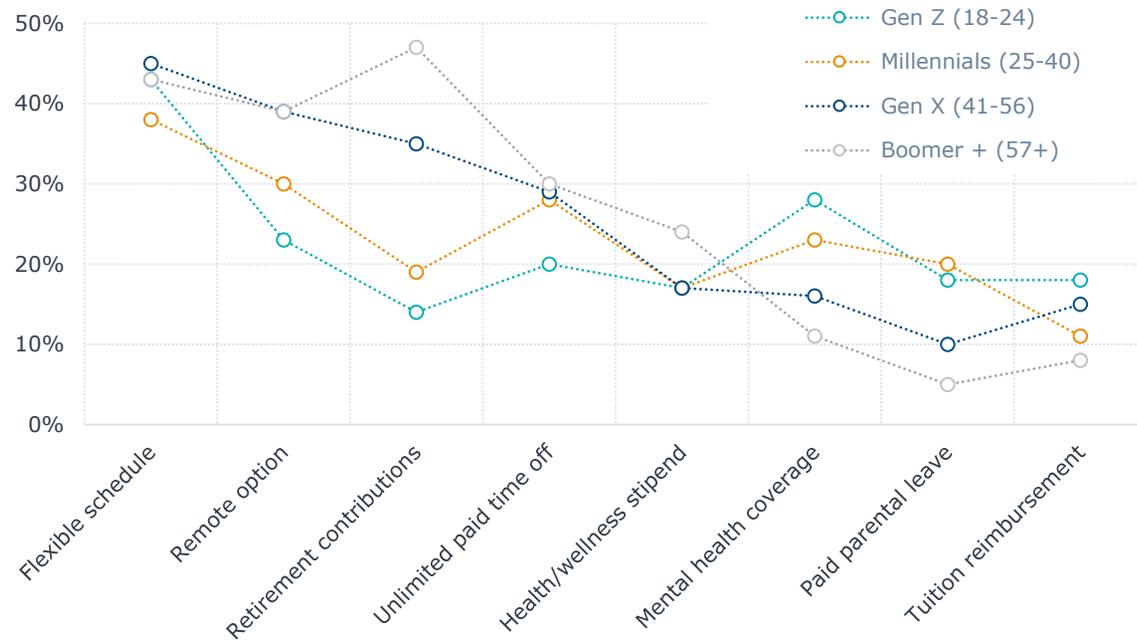
Top Three Reasons Workers Quit

Percentage of Surveyed Individuals Citing Selected Factors as Reasons for Leaving a Job (Pew)

63%	63%	57%
Pay was too low	No opportunities for advancement	Felt disrespected at work

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![EAB]

Cut your staff's workload down to size

1

Focus on the Right Activities

Activity overload

One important way to reduce staff overwork and burnout is to cut unproductive activities from their workload.

There is no question that some of the tasks that staff spend their time performing have questionable impact. A portion of the activities that fill their days is a legacy from earlier cohorts of students and technologies that were less varied and effective. Others are holdovers from the early days of the pandemic, when student-facing teams, entering crisis mode, rolled out a panoply of ultimately unsustainable emergency measures to make sure they hit their numbers.

It's time to triage

Many teams have been understandably reluctant to cut student-facing activities. Figuring out which ones actually move the dial on outcomes is hard work and was, arguably, not the best use of time when staff members were ample and inexpensive. In today's labor climate, however, this kind of analysis should be considered a mandatory first priority.

How to Decide Which Activities to Cut

Make time for research
Assessing your student-facing activities can become a perpetual second priority when you're constantly having to put out fires. Make sure to carve out dedicated time on your calendar so that required analyses do not languish on your to-do list.

Ask your staff
Your team has unique insight into which activities are impactful and which are not; ask them how they think their time might be better spent. The simple act of consulting with them in this way will, incidentally, also help boost their morale.

Run the numbers
Even basic data about how particular activities are impacting your student-facing activities can greatly improve the soundness of your triage decisions. Don't let overly ambitious analyses or excessive concern about rigor delay your efforts.

Perform control tests
You may be forced to curtail some activities in advance of having solid data on their impact. Make the most of this situation by turning the exercise into a control test, withholding the intervention from some students and not others.

Pay special attention to resource-intensive interventions
When figuring out which activities to cut, look for those that take up a lot resources but do not generate much of an impact. These represent your easiest path to saving cost and time.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

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Focus on the Right Students

An overwhelming task

The greatest demands on student-facing staff such as professional advisors are associated with managing their assigned cohorts.

Even before the current staffing crisis, few advising teams had the capacity required to perform close and intensive outreach to all students. All too often, advisors are left to guess about which students to focus on and simply hope for the best—an approach that can lead to under-investing time in some students while over-investing in others. This can quickly lead to an overwhelming amount of work for your team.

Focusing where it counts

Thoughtfully designed "differentiated care" models, such as the four proposed on the right, can realign your finite staff capacity for greatest impact. In all models, high-intensity interactions are reserved for a limited set of students, while the remainder are served through less labor-intensive forms of outreach. The result is that staff can interact with more students and give each the degree of care they need.

Examples of Differentiated Care

Four models for distributing work and focusing efforts within a student success team

	Touch-points	Communication Modality	Intervention Priority	Staff Assigned
Intense Care Coordinate care among a network of support offices	8 - 10 per term	Live contact (F2F, call, zoom)	Top priority	Specialist
Active Monitoring Surface problems early and proactively focus support	4 - 6 per term	Combo of live and messaging	Second wave	Experienced
Baseline Support Rely on scalable, self-serve, and automated guidance	1 - 3 per term	Text and email, w/ occasional live	Lowest priority	Early career

Level of need (vertical axis) — *Number of students* (horizontal axis)

More Equitable Support
Students' needs are met with customized support rather than a "one size fits all" approach

Staff Time Savings
Time is allocated based on the degree of student need rather than standard expectations

Cost Savings
Scalable support is focused on the entire population, while expert and in-depth care only on those in need

Learn how EAB technology can support implementation of these practices on **pg. 51**

Source: EAB research and analysis.

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Accommodate your staff's flexible-work preferences

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Employers and Employees Misaligned on Remote Work

A major consideration

The rise of flexible work arrangements is, without a doubt, one of the main factors underlying the current volatility in the nation's labor markets. Survey after survey has shown just how strong workers' desire for such flexibility became after their first exposure to it during the pandemic. Student-facing offices are no exception in this regard; administrators interviewed for this report consistently cited a desire for greater work flexibility as a factor in staff resignations and inability to fill open positions.

Conflicting preferences

Equally consistent and no less significant is the finding that attitudes toward flexible work differ markedly across senior administrators and the rank and file, with support waning the higher up in the organization you go.

This appears to be one of the reasons why few student-facing teams currently offer their staff more than token concessions on flexible work.

Percentage of Surveyed Employers and Employees, by Remote-Work Preference[1]

	Full-time on site	Hybrid	Full-time remote
What employers say	38%	45%	16%
What employees want	26%	30%	44%

11% of university presidents say >50% of staff will be permitted to work remotely at least 2 days per week

1) Data shown is not specific to higher education. Source is Mercer.

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Can You Offer Meaningful Opportunities for Flexible Work?

An indispensable foundation

Student-facing work has historically been built around putting staff in as close proximity to students as possible, as often as possible—an approach that would seem to limit opportunities for flexible work.

Some element of this is inescapable; few teams will be comfortable pulling back significantly on in-person visits and other forms of face-to-face interactions with students. That said, administrators should set the goal of maintaining the most valuable elements of in–person interaction while also honoring staff members' desire for flexibility.

Anticipating trade-offs

Approaches that create more remote-work options for staff may come at a cost. For example, separating remote-suitable work from work that must be done in person into different roles reduces the number of staff who can do both, thereby limiting your ability to efficiently accommodate fluctuations in demand for campus visits. Penalties such as this must be weighed against the likely recruitment and retention benefits of offering greater flexibility to your staff.

Looking Beyond a Legacy of "Inherently On-Campus" Department Functions and Staff Positions

Revisit your balance between in-person and flexible modalities

Mostly in person — Mostly remote
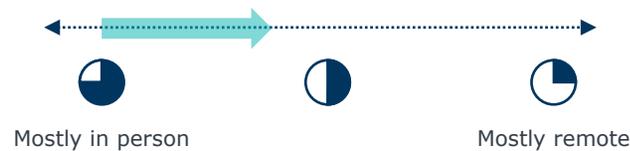
Identify in-person activities that have proven impact; cut those that do not. Maximize resource allocation for high-impact remote/flexible activities.

Redefine roles to enable more flexibility

- ▪ Remote-suitable work
- ▪ Necessarily in-person work
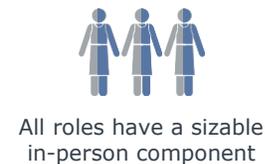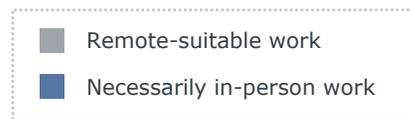
All roles have a sizable in-person component **VS.** In-person work concentrated in dedicated roles

Maximize match with personal preferences

Mostly in-person | Mostly remote

eab.com

A Flexible-First Approach

A likely inevitability

While few student-facing teams have truly embraced flexible work, it seems likely that a hyper-competitive labor market and workers' well-documented preference for flexibility will eventually push them to do so.

This page describes a framework for thinking about the transition.

Flexibility as default

According to the approach shown at right, staff are required to work from campus only when there is a clear and compelling rationale for doing so, with remote work as the (optional) default.

This approach has several advantages. First and foremost, it is sure to enhance staff recruitment and retention. Second, in providing an explicit and easily understood rationale for flexible-work decisions, it makes the administration of policies less complicated and helps avoid confusion on the part of staff.

Particulars aside, the overarching spirit of the approach is to make flexible work as available to your staff as possible (versus the kind of rationing of it that is more commonly seen today).

A Constraint-Based Perspective on Flexible Work

Staff Allowed to Choose Where They Work, Except as Below

Calendar-based constraints
Staff in certain roles must work from the office at certain times of year (e.g., campus-visit season)

Role-based constraints
There is no way for the essential work that some roles entail to be done remotely

Task-based constraints
Some activities, such as leading campus tours, can be performed only in person, on campus

Personal preference
Some staff prefer to perform—on campus and in person—work that could just as easily be done remotely

> This same logic can be applied to non-location-based aspects of flexible work (e.g., flextime)

Addressing an understandable reluctance

Where flexible work is concerned, common apprehensions cited by administrators include the potentially negative impact it might have on team-building, loss of the spontaneous learning that happens when staff are co-located, and potential drops in productivity when staff are not continuously monitored. These fears should be weighed against the certainty of higher staff quit rates and impaired productivity associated with restrictive flexible-work policies. Administrators should also be reassured by the ample early evidence showing that flexible work arrangements typically result in increased staff productivity rather than decreased productivity.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

eab.com

Consider the Full Spectrum of Flexible-Work Options

More than remote

The preceding pages focus primarily on the remote-work aspects of flexible work arrangements. In actuality, the term "flexible work" comprises a variety of possible arrangements, including considerations other than the location from which a staffer works, as illustrated in the chart at right.

Multidimensional flexibility

Most obviously, flexibility can also apply to time; for example, staff may choose to work the same number of hours but distribute them differently across a day or week. Flextime, alternative shifts and schedules, and compressed work weeks fall under this heading.

Flexibility can also relate to how the employer-employee relationship is structured. Employees might, for example, be contract, gig, or freelance workers rather than permanent members of your staff.

Types and Prevalence of Various Forms of Flexible Work[1]

Dimension	Type	Prevalence
Where	Full-time remote work	◑
	Part-time remote work	◑
When	Flextime	◑
	Alternative shifts/schedules	◑
	Compressed work week	◑
What	Part-time	◑
	Job sharing	◔
	Phased/flexible retirement	◔
How	Fluctuating work week	◔
Who	Contract/gig/freelancing	◑
	Internal talent marketplace	◔

Prevalence Key
(% of employers)

◑	Majority practice *>50%*
◑	Common practice *20%-50%*
◔	Not prevalent *<50%*

1) Information shown is not specific to higher education

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Some Flexible-Work Resources

Good Starting Points

EAB's Remote Work and Hybrid Workplace Resource Center
https://eab.com/research/strategy/resource-center/remote-work-education-leaders/

Topics addressed include the benefits of remote work, how to create clear and equitable remote-work policies, and how to effectively manage and support remote workers.

Mercer website
https://www.mercer.com/our-thinking/career/improve-flexible-working.html

Mercer, a preeminent HR consulting firm, hosts valuable flexible-work resources on its website, including survey data, high-level strategic guidance, and information on related best practices.
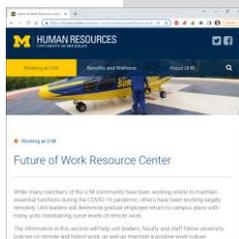
University of Michigan website
https://hr.umich.edu/working-u-m/my-employment/future-work-resource-center

Michigan's website offers extensive guidance for staff and managers on flexible work arrangements, including rationales for them, examples of them in practice, and advice on how to set them up.

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Ensure appropriate compensation

SECTION **3**

Low Compensation Creates Flight Risk

New prominence for pay

Compensation for many student-facing roles has long been low, even by the modest standards of higher education. While this may have been less of a concern in the past, when employers had more leverage and student-facing work was less taxing than it now is, under current conditions it is a serious problem.

Threats from all sides

The example on the right is from admission, but it applies equally well to other student-facing roles.

Admissions staff have no shortage of options when it comes to interesting, better-paid, and otherwise congenial jobs within higher education and beyond. Their soft skills and focus on results make them attractive candidates for companies that have moved to competency-based hiring strategies.

The threat posed by industry has increased, given the private sector's ability to react more quickly to changing expectations for compensation and the new ability to recruit nationally for roles that were geographically constrained prior to the rise of remote work.

Typical Compensation[1] Puts Many Admissions Roles in or near the Danger Zone

A "hardship threshold" of $60,000

Role	Compensation
Vice President of Enrollment Management	$136,000
Director of University Admissions	$66,766
Enrollment Manager	$60,570
Admissions Officer	$45,607
Admissions Counselor	$36,792

Thirty-seven percent of employees making less than $60K report seriously considering leaving their job—a rate 1.6x higher than for individuals earning more[2]

Industry Throwing Dollars at Prospective Hires

% of Organizations Taking Specific Measures to Combat Recruitment and Retention Problems[3]

50%
Offering pay higher than market rate

42%
Offering retention bonuses

29%
Beating or matching counter-offers received by potential hires

One Former Admissions Staffer's Story

"When I left my position as Associate Dean of Admissions to take a consulting job, my salary almost doubled, even though my new role depended on the same skill set as the old one and the work was not nearly as stressful. And, by the way, the institution I left was a top 100 nationally ranked college with high tuition and a big endowment, not a cash-strapped regional private."

Source: "The Truth About What Employees Want," Mercer, 2021; "Real-time insights survey: Inflation is hitting Americans hard—how are employers responding?," Mercer, 2022; Tim Stobierski, "Working in University Admissions: Jobs and Salaries," October 30, 2019; EAB research and analysis.

1) Source: Stobierski.
2) Source: Mercer 2021. These figures are not specific to higher education/admissions.
3) Source: Mercer 2022.

Lobby Your Institution for Increased Compensation

A question of influence

Student-facing teams' ability to inflect compensation is limited by the fact that an institution's pay rates are typically set by a centralized HR office (and, in the case of public institutions, further dictated by state policy).

That said, administrators should do all they can to influence their organizations' compensation policies.

Supplementing HR analysis

Most HR offices don't have the resources to do deep dives on compensation for all roles in their institutions and will not have the same degree of motivation as administrators to ensure appropriate pay for team members.

Administrators can help by gathering and analyzing their own data and then presenting that information to their institutional HR partners. Think of it as bringing your compensation analysts information that they want and value (much of which you have unique access to)—information that will help them do their job even more effectively.

Information to Share with Your Organization's Paymasters

✓ Number of admissions positions unfilled for 3+ months

✓ Current quit rate versus historical

✓ Number of failed searches in past 12 months

✓ Negative impact on processes/outcomes

✓ Market context on the staffing crisis ┈┈ Use information from this white paper

✓ Recruitment/retention enhancements you've made

✓ Cost cuts you've made to help fund positions

✓ How much revenue your staff brings in ┈┈ See page 28

✓ Insights from exit interviews with departing staff

✓ Feedback from failed hires

✓ Compensation benchmarks ┈┈ e.g., advancement

✓ What your institution pays for comparable roles

✓ What industry pays individuals with comparable backgrounds

Source: EAB research and analysis.

eab.com

Make a Revenue-Based Argument for Higher Pay

A commercial perspective

In many organizations, commercial roles are among the most generously compensated because of the crucial part they play in generating revenue.

Student-facing staff such as professional advisors may not typically be thought of as commercial—especially by individuals not intimately familiar with their work. Nevertheless, advisors help retain students, which means that they contribute to securing tuition revenue for the next term.

This means that the results of their efforts can be quantified in dollars, which then can be used to make ROI-driven arguments for increasing compensation when making new hires.

Administrators should leverage this perspective in their efforts to win additional funding for their teams.

Show the Crucial Role Your Team Plays in Supporting Your Institution's Financial Well-Being

Scripting

VPSS

"Our newly hired advisors will pay for themselves if each new role allows us to **retain [N] more students**. Any additional students retained beyond that will directly contribute to enrollment revenue."

Run the numbers for your institution

What is the break-even improvement in retention needed to cover the cost of a new advising hire?

$$\left(\text{Cost of salary and overhead for new hire} \right) \div \left(\text{Average net tuition revenue per student per year} \right) = \left(\text{Number of additional retained students needed for breakeven} \right)$$
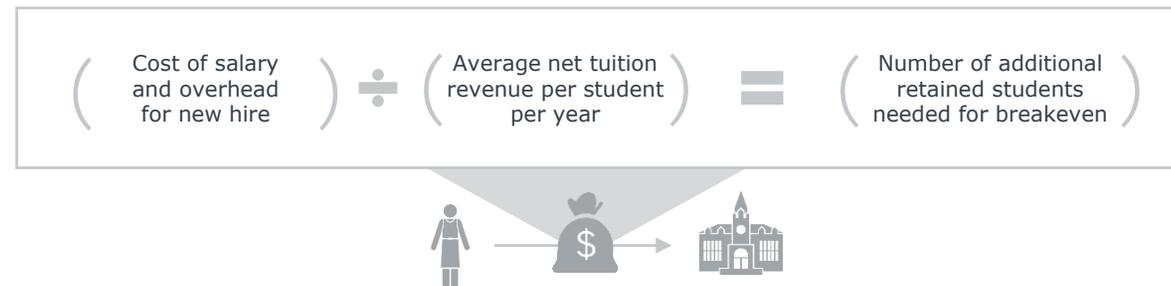
A Role for Nonrecurring Payments

Flexible funds

While raising staff salaries can be a long and complicated endeavor, there are other compensation-related options available to administrators for improving staff recruitment and retention.

The example illustrated on this page is based on making discrete, non-repeating payments to staff.

This approach is appealing from a budget standpoint insofar as it does not commit you to ongoing expenditures. It is also a flexible means of using surplus funds, such as those related to unfilled staff positions.

Effective (as far as they go)

While bonuses do have a role to play in recruiting and retaining staff, it is important to recognize their limitations as well. The main one is that, because the payments are not recurring, the total dollar amounts typically involved are not game changers from your staff's point of view. Bonuses are best thought of as a way to make prospective hires feel good, to boost staff morale by recognizing their contributions, and as a means of offering temporary relief in times of unusual financial strain.

Nonrecurring Payouts Are a Flexible Tool for Temporary Relief

Example: Lapsed Salary Turned into Bonus Payments

Unused funds from unfilled staff positions

Prospective hires

Signing bonuses

Retention bonuses

Current staff
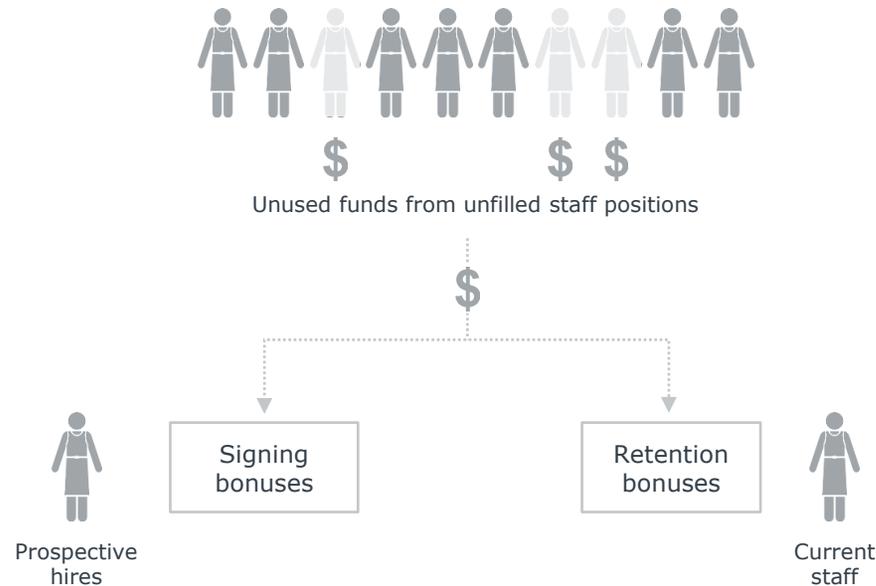
A note on lapsed-salary funds

Policies regarding allowable uses of lapsed salary differ by institution, with some HR teams being more restrictive than others. That said, such rules can be more a matter of institutional preference than hard limits; if you are facing related restrictions, it may be worth seeing if your HR team can be convinced to make an exception.

Additional Uses for Lapsed Salary

Redeploying fallow dollars

Depending on the level of difficulty you're having attracting new staff, it may make sense to reallocate dollars associated with your unfilled positions to existing staff rather than reserving them for new recruits who may or may not materialize.

This approach can significantly increase pay for your remaining team members and thereby improve retention. Should any of those staffers leave, that higher rate of pay will also help you fill those positions more easily.

A calculated risk

One obvious drawback of the approach described here is that it commits you to reduced staffing levels, at least for a while (because you'll have spent all your budget on a smaller number of personnel, with no funds remaining for new hires). Even so, some teams might consider it worth the risk, given the advantages described above and the additional benefit of establishing a higher baseline from which to realize future increases in staff compensation. Furthermore, even as the approach is being initiated, you can start putting together a case for hiring additional staff (at your newly elevated rate of pay).

Raising Salaries for Remaining Staff

Hypothetical, for Entry-Level Student-Facing Staff

				Salary	Total Cost
10 positions at $40K each	A	Fully staffed		$40K	$400K
	B	20% vacancy		$40K	$320K
8 positions at $50K each	C	Fully staffed		$50K	$400K

- Dollars attached to unfilled positions reallocated to salaries for remaining staff
- Total complement of budgeted positions effectively reduced by 20%
- Approach is budget-neutral
- Additional staff cannot be hired until existing staff members leave or budget approval received for additional positions at newly elevated pay rate

Source: EAB research and analysis.

eab.com

Create an engaging work environment

eab.com

What Makes Staff Want to Stay?

Unpacking "engagement"

While most organizational leaders agree that engagement plays an important role in retaining staff, there's less clarity and consensus on how to go about creating it.

This is understandable; your staff's level of engagement will depend on any number of things, from how meaningful they find their work to the quality of their relationships with work colleagues to opportunities for advancement.

Managers at the center

What does seem beyond dispute is the fact that an organization's managers ultimately have the most influence in regard to creating and sustaining staff engagement. The truth of this statement is attested to by the well-known fact that dissatisfaction with managers consistently rates as one of the most common reasons staff give for quitting.

Given the crucial role that managers play, the next three pages present an overview of three aspects of staff management that most directly impact employee engagement and retention.

Three Pillars of Staff Morale over Which Managers Have Direct Control

Management team

Effective communication
- Careful listening
- Contextualization
- Acknowledging staff accomplishments

Robust staff development
- Targeted training and support
- Clear and compelling career paths
- Opportunities to expand skill set

Maximum staff agency
- Clear goals
- Adequate resources
- Minimum interference from above

How you treat your staff matters a lot
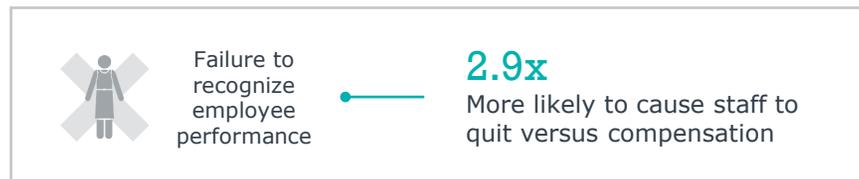
Failure to recognize employee performance

2.9x
More likely to cause staff to quit versus compensation

eab.com

Ensure Effective Communication

A foundation for your efforts

Effective communication is the means through which all other facets of strong personnel management are actualized, and it should, for this reason, be a primary focus of your efforts.

The primacy of listening

Perhaps the most important element of effective communication is listening. It is by far the best tool you have for understanding what your staff wants and the degree to which they are getting it. Furthermore, and not incidentally, the mere act of thoughtful listening can do a lot to boost staff morale.

Listening to staff also appears to be an area in which many colleges have running room; research by the HR consulting firm Mercer has found that higher education lags industry significantly in terms of worker-attitude scores on statements such as "management makes an effort to listen to and get input from employees."

One important step forward for administrators is to recognize active listening as a skill that must be learned and practiced.

Three Keys to Optimal Performance

Careful listening

Check in with your staff regularly and ask them what their goals are, how you can help them achieve them, and how your team can improve. Let your staff do most of the talking, and make it your aim to understand them as deeply as possible.

Acknowledging staff accomplishments

Celebrate your team's achievements and those of individual staffers. Highlight genuinely noteworthy and interesting successes, especially generalizable innovations worthy of emulation. Give credit where credit is due.

Contextualization

Show your staff how their efforts promote the team's goals, contribute to the well-being of your institution, and help the students you serve. Also situate their work in the context of student success as a profession.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

eab.com

Promote Robust Staff Development

Thinking beyond promotion

One traditional challenge of managing a staff is the limited opportunity for advancement that student-facing teams, with their characteristically bottom-heavy org structure, offer.

Fortunately, there are other ways you can honor your team members' desire for career development. Research suggests, for example, that lateral moves—opportunities for your staff to try something new and take on a fresh challenge—are even more meaningful to staff than increases in compensation or promotions.

Development a known priority

Student-facing staff in particular place a high value on professional development opportunities, and honoring that need can help retain them.

Keep in mind that there is a broad spectrum of options through which you can do that, from having your staff attend professional-association conferences to providing them with thoughtfully chosen selections of literature on topics relevant to their work and interests.

Three Keys to Optimal Performance

Targeted training and support

Arm your staff with the knowledge they need to perform at a high level. Do so in a multimodal way, with formal training and instruction, self-serve options, mentoring relationships, and frequent coaching-style feedback from managers.

Clear and compelling career paths

Create a structured framework for your staff's career advancement, with frequent milestones to acknowledge accomplishments and skills mastery.[1] Give your staff forward visibility into possible futures in the profession and beyond.

Opportunities to expand skill set

Staff are more likely to stick around if they believe that you will help them develop valuable skills. Enhance this dynamic by finding out what capabilities each team member is most interested in acquiring and creating opportunities that help them do that.

Staff Place a High Value on Lateral Opportunities[2]
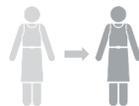
Opportunities for lateral career moves

2.5x More predictive of staff retention than compensation

12x More predictive of staff retention than promotion

1) See page 57.
2) Source for data is Sull and Zweig.

Source: Donald Sull, Charles Sull, and Ben Zweig, "Toxic Culture is Driving the Great Resignation," MIT Sloan Management Review, January 11, 2022; EAB research and analysis.

Enable Maximum Staff Agency

Staff want control

One clear lesson from the pandemic is that staff place a high value on flexible work arrangements. And it seems that an important factor underlying that preference is workers' desire to have control over the particulars of their day-to-day activity—what they spend their time doing, where they are doing it, and when.

A foundation for autonomy

Enabling the kind of freedom described above depends on a robust framework of support.

One key element of that is giving your staff clear goals. Another is giving them the resources they need to execute their work to a high standard. That includes imparting to them the basic foundational knowledge required to execute their role effectively and subsequently providing them with easy ways to get answers to questions they'll encounter as they continue to develop.

Note additionally that the aim of maximizing autonomy should apply equally to staff who are mostly working in person and those who are primarily working remotely.

Three Keys to Optimal Performance

Clear goals

It's hard for staff to show initiative if it's not clear what they are meant to accomplish. Give them quantifiable goals where possible; where that is not feasible, give them a detailed qualitative description of what good performance looks like.

Adequate resources

Ensure that the goals you're giving staff are consistent with the time, information, technology, training, mentoring, coaching, and other resources available to them and vice versa.

Minimum interference from above

Given clear goals and the right level of support, your staff are better placed than anyone (including you) to figure out how best to produce the results that are expected of them. Promote a culture of staff self-directedness and autonomy.

Ramp up your staff-recruitment efforts

eab.com

Take the Initiative in Sourcing Candidates

A shrinking applicant pool

Student-facing teams have, until recently, been blessed by low quit rates and robust candidate pipelines, both of which made it unnecessary for administrators to invest a lot of effort in sourcing new recruits.

While this had been slowly changing for several years, during the pandemic the situation was transformed overnight, with many teams seeing a sudden collapse of interest in open positions.

Recruit continuously

The evaporation of candidate pools has, in turn, created a need for leaders to take a more active role in identifying and courting prospective hires. Several ideas for doing that are illustrated at right.

Perhaps more important than any particular tactic is the overarching mindset—that of accepting direct responsibility for sourcing candidates, being constantly on the lookout for new talent, and being ready to seize opportunities when they present themselves.

Things You Can Do to Find More (and Better) Prospective Hires

Draw on a maximal range of sources

Increasing the number of places you're looking for new hires will also increase your rate of success. Often-overlooked sources of leads include social media, professional-association conferences, and personal networks.

Offer referral bonuses

Pay your staff for successful candidate referrals. An added benefit of this approach is that prospective hires who come to you through existing staff are, to some extent, pre-vetted.

Make time for related tasks

Carving out even small portions of your (and your staff's) time for hiring-related work can deliver meaningful results. Put related holds on your calendar to ensure that the necessary work gets done.

The special case of "boomerang" staff

Stay in touch with staff who have left your team. They sometimes find that their new job is not all that they had hoped for and would gladly come back to you.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

eab.com

Make Your Job Posts Easy to Find

Under the radar

One hurdle administrators face when recruiting staff is that many individuals who would make excellent candidates have little familiarity with student success work and related career opportunities—it may not even occur to them to look for the kinds of positions you're offering.

Furthermore, even people who are specifically interested in working with students may struggle to figure out where, specifically, to look for opportunities and how (e.g., what titles to search for).

A dedicated space

Unfortunately, the careers portions of many college websites are unlikely to help matters much, as they can often make it hard for interested parties to find positions unless they already have a pretty good idea of what they're searching for.

One way of addressing this challenge is by building out your own Careers webpages (which you can ultimately link back to the school's official job postings).

Prominent Placement

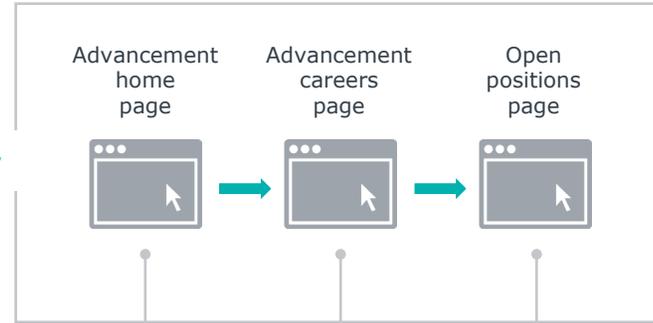*An Example from Georgetown University's Advancement Office*

General Georgetown Careers Website

versus

Advancement Team's Sub-domain

Advancement home page → Advancement careers page → Open positions page
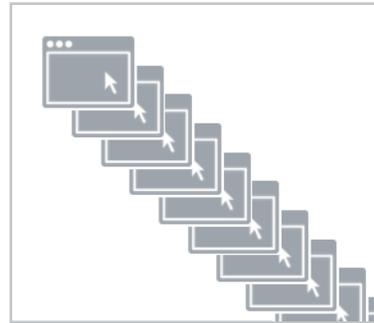
Advancement positions scattered across the site. Searching entails guesswork as to titles, repeated attempts, and manual filtering of results.

Features prominent link to advancement careers page

Features prominent link to open-positions page

All open advancement positions together in one place

1) A pseudonym.

Make Your Jobs Sound Amazing

A knowledge deficit

As noted on the preceding page, the general public's low level of familiarity with careers in student success means that you'll have to give potential hires some extra help to find your job postings. It also means you'll need to educate them on the roles themselves.

Career education

One implication of the factors described above is that there's a lot riding on your job description; for many candidates, what they learn from it may be the entirety of what they know about careers in student success.

For that reason, you should invest a lot of care in your job postings. You will, for example, want to go beyond dry descriptions of the narrow specifics of the role and include more aspirational messaging of the sort highlighted in the graphic at right.

The overarching goal here is to make student-facing careers sound as appealing as possible, with a particular focus on what matters most to your prospective hires.

A Tale of Two Job Postings

Typical: A Primarily Institutional Perspective on the Role—90% Dry, Boring Fine Print

- Description of role
- Reporting structure
- Qualifications
- Application-submission guidelines
- Required documentation
- Vaccination requirements

Optimal: Highlight What Matters Most to Candidates

- Mix of in-person and remote work
- High-energy, collegial work environment
- Rapid development of valuable, portable, marketable skills
- High degree of interpersonal interaction
- Emphasis on self-directed, autonomous work
- All staff supported by mentors
- Wide range of opportunities for role specialization
- Amply resourced professional-development opportunities
- Connections to other professions
- Tuition-remission benefit, links to graduate programs
- Doing work that helps students

"Professionals pointed to the rewards of their work as a major incentive for entering and staying in the field, and, at all levels, they displayed remarkable unity in outlining those rewards. In essays and interviews, the theme of helping students and their families dominated."

"Career Paths for Admission Officers: A Survey Report"
Judy Phair/NACAC

Source: EAB research and analysis.

eab.com

Show a Compensation Ramp

A sensitive topic

For understandable reasons, many employers prefer not to share information about compensation with prospective hires before they have to. This is doubly true for student-facing roles, for which compensation tends to be on the low side.
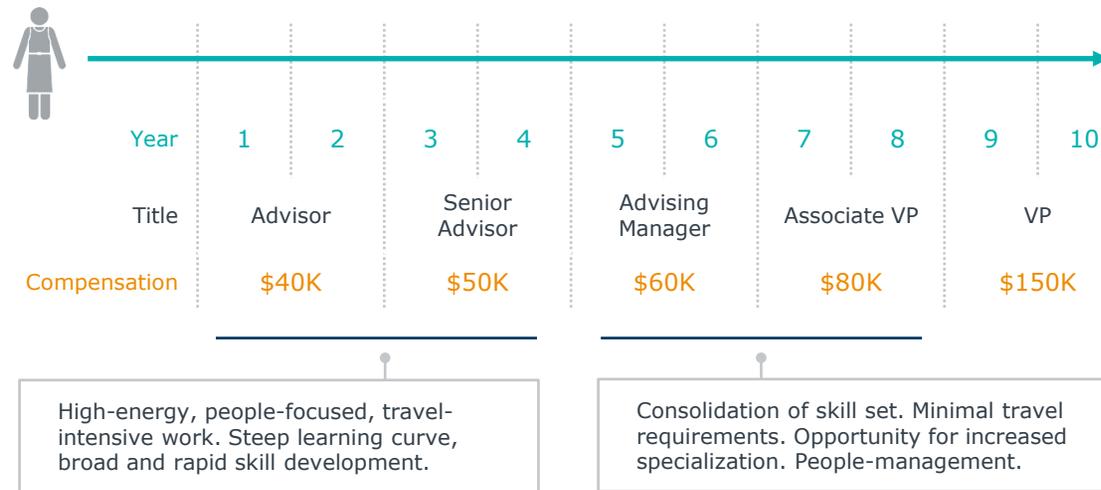
That said, there comes a point where you'll have to tell candidates how much you're proposing to pay them, and you'll want to put that sensitive information in the most positive context possible. Several of the other ideas covered in this section help do that. But the example at right gets most directly at the question of compensation.

Show a bright future

While most teams may not be comfortable sharing compensation specifics with the level of detail and transparency shown at right (which might, for example, cause consternation among existing staff), the idea here is simply to reassure prospective hires that, even if your proposed rate of pay may sound low, there is a future in which they could quickly be earning significantly more—a point that could be made with less precise data.

Creating Forward Visibility into Potential Future Pay

Hypothetical Illustration of Career Progression Across Advising Roles

Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Title	Advisor		Senior Advisor		Advising Manager		Associate VP		VP	
Compensation	$40K		$50K		$60K		$80K		$150K	

High-energy, people-focused, travel-intensive work. Steep learning curve, broad and rapid skill development.

Consolidation of skill set. Minimal travel requirements. Opportunity for increased specialization. People-management.

eab.com

Highlight Development Opportunities

Broadening your appeal

Many individuals who would make excellent additions to your staff might not be interested in long-term careers in student success. Furthermore, the bottom-heavy org structures of many teams limit opportunities for promotion in any case.
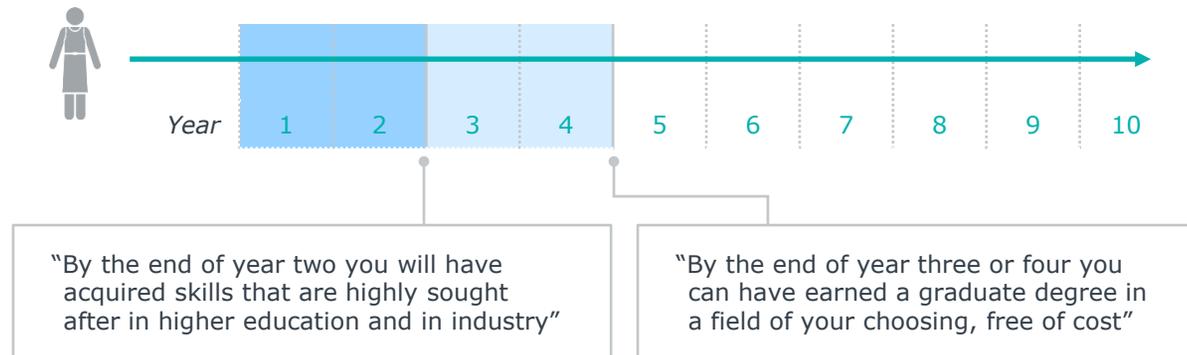
You'll want to frame your value proposition to prospective hires in a way that not only acknowledges these facts but also puts them in a positive light.

Compelling stories

One powerful narrative you can use in this context is that of your team as a unique training ground that rapidly equips new staffers with skills that are highly valued in higher education and industry. (Note that information about your tuition benefit—see pages 42 to 44—ties in with this story.)

Presenting real-world case studies of interesting and well-paid work your ex-staffers went on to do can help reinforce the impact of this narrative. And you should, of course, illustrate compelling career trajectories within the team itself.

Emphasize Acquisition of Valuable Skills and Optional Off-Ramps to Other Compelling Roles in Higher Ed and Industry

Year | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10

"By the end of year two you will have acquired skills that are highly sought after in higher education and in industry"

"By the end of year three or four you can have earned a graduate degree in a field of your choosing, free of cost"

What Kinds of Work Do Student Success Staffers Go On to Do?

- Advancement
- Communications
- Marketing
- Admissions
- Financial Aid
- Student Affairs

Highlight especially compelling stories of particular individuals

Source: EAB research and analysis.

eab.com

Leverage Your Tuition-Remission Benefit

Hamstrung by low pay

While the low rate of pay associated with many student-facing roles may not have been a major issue in the past, when teams often had more candidates for open positions than they knew what to do with, in today's hot job market it can be a serious liability.

Given the generally slow-moving nature of college bureaucracies and the persistent resource constraints faced by higher education, few teams will be able to meaningfully raise compensation with the requisite speed. They will, instead, need to look to other ways to make the financial case to prospective hires.

A highly valuable benefit

Happily, there already exists a unique and valuable benefit that colleges and universities can offer to recruits—the tuition remission benefit, i.e., deeply discounted or free tuition. Depending on the courses taken, the role in question, and the staffer's level of seniority, the value of this benefit can be the equivalent of 50% or more of their salary.

Salary Alone Versus Salary Plus Annual Value of Tuition Benefit

Hypothetical Based on Typical Values for an Entry-Level College Employee Pursuing an MBA[1]

+50%

$40,000 — Salary

$60,000 — Salary + tuition savings

---
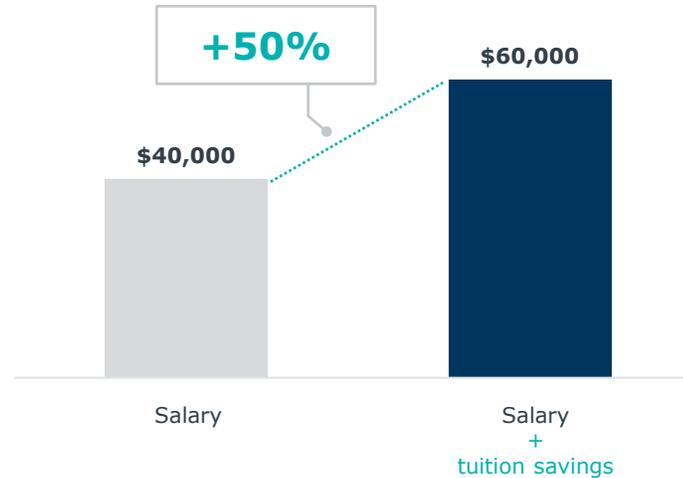
1) Assumptions: Counselor completes her degree in three years. Total tuition cost of MBA = $60,000. Tuition remission benefit is 100%.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Innovative Tuition-Remission Implementations

A more active approach

The urgency of the current staffing crisis has pushed some institutions to look beyond traditional uses of the tuition-remission benefit. This can mean, for example, moving past a passive approach that relies on employee initiative for uptake of the benefit and, instead, actively highlighting it in staff recruitment efforts.
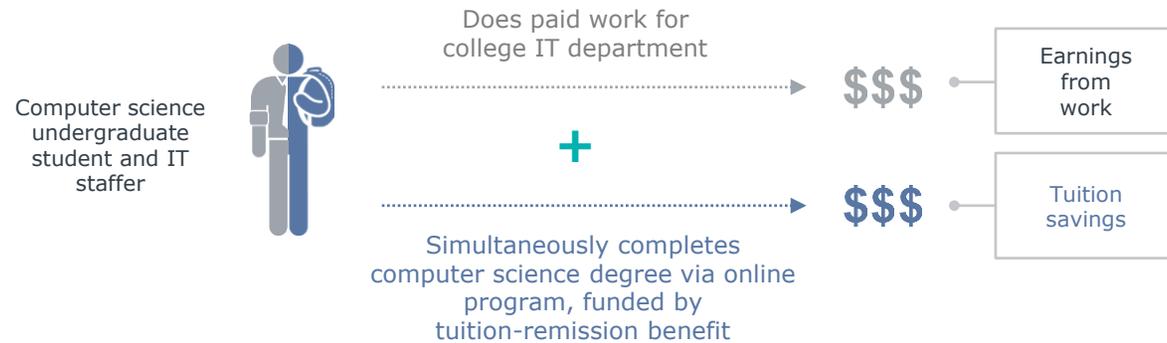
Attracting elusive talent

One unconventional example (not specific to student success teams) is shown at right.

Illustrated here is a tactic Danube College (a pseudonym) implemented to help with recruitment for notoriously hard-to-fill IT positions. As shown, exceptionally talented individuals among the school's undergraduates are hired to work for the institution's IT department, while completing their degree in computer science, funded by the school's tuition-remission benefit.

A similar approach might be used to fill IT-intensive roles and other hard-to-recruit positions on student-facing teams.

IT Position Filled with Talented Undergrads via Tuition-Remission Benefit

Example from Danube College[1]

Computer science undergraduate student and IT staffer

Does paid work for college IT department → $$$ — Earnings from work

+

Simultaneously completes computer science degree via online program, funded by tuition-remission benefit → $$$ — Tuition savings

1) A pseudonym.

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Potential for Partnering with Graduate Programs

Your primary audience

The preceding page showed the unusual example of the tuition-remission benefit being leveraged in the recruitment of undergraduate staffers.

More commonly, the benefit is used by older employees to fund graduate studies. Opportunities also exist for schools to more actively exploit the tuition benefit within this larger and more typical context. A hypothetical example is shown at right.
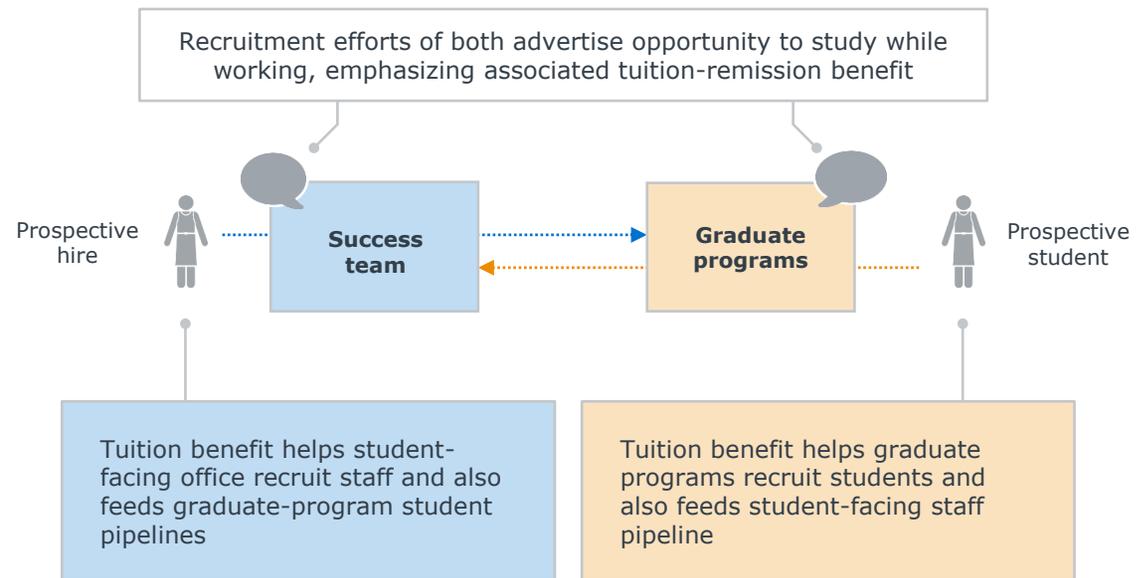
Mutual benefit

The example on this page is based on both the student-facing team and related graduate programs promoting the tuition benefit to potential students/employees and establishing links between the two efforts.

A number of academic programs would be a natural fit for this type of approach, including a school's Master of Education in Higher Education Administration program, MBA, Master of Science in Marketing, and Master of Arts in Communication.

Student-Facing Team and Related Graduate Programs Feed Each Other's Pipelines

Hypothetical

Recruitment efforts of both advertise opportunity to study while working, emphasizing associated tuition-remission benefit

Prospective hire → Success team ⇄ Graduate programs ← Prospective student

Tuition benefit helps student-facing office recruit staff and also feeds graduate-program student pipelines

Tuition benefit helps graduate programs recruit students and also feeds student-facing staff pipeline

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Optimize your org structure

6

Anchor Your All-Important Senior Ranks

A new kind of turnover

One of the more alarming aspects of the staffing crisis has been an increased quit rate among the senior ranks of student-facing teams, where, in contrast to entry-level positions, turnover is not typically high.

When tenured staff are lost, so is a trove of precious institutional knowledge that can take years to reproduce. Your most experienced staff should, therefore, be the primary focus of your retention efforts.

Similarities and differences

Luckily, many of the things that help retain staff generally also work with more tenured (and typically older) team members.

That said, there are differences. For example, older staff place higher priority on remote work options (see page 15).

Also keep in mind that individual differences will ultimately matter more than any generalizations you might make about any age group. This is another reason that careful listening should play a central role in your approach to managing staff (see page 39).

Retention Approach by Staff Position

Student Success Team Hierarchy
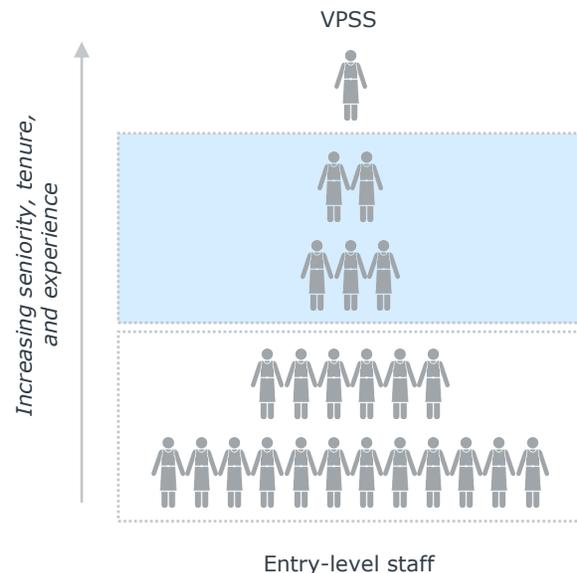
Your most tenured staff are a proven quantity and a priceless repository of institutional knowledge. Double down on retention efforts for them, with a special focus on compensation.

High turnover is typically unavoidable among less senior staff. Hang on to them as long as you can without expecting them to stay indefinitely. Focus your most intensive retention efforts preferentially on staff with exceptional promise and those with rare and essential skills.

Source: EAB research and analysis.

eab.com

The Special Case of Staff Approaching Retirement Age

An important segment

As noted on the preceding page, your most experienced staff should be a particular focus of your retention efforts. Whatever form those efforts take, they should recognize opportunities associated specifically with individuals nearing retirement age.

Offer options

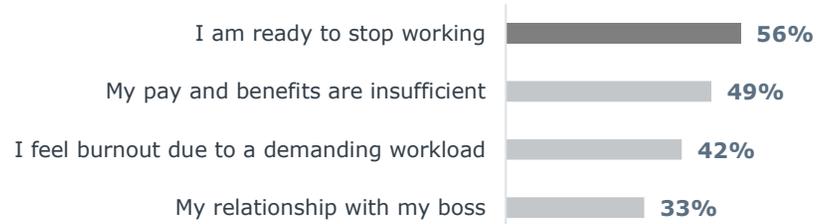One important thing to be aware of is that many employees aged 55+ don't necessarily want to retire.

There are a number of things you can do to help retain staff in this category. For example, team members who want to keep working but would prefer a lighter schedule might be offered flexible arrangements such as phased retirement or contract work.

In the case of staff who are thinking of retiring completely, conversations about financial readiness can in some cases prevent staff from leaving before they are in a position to do so. Consider connecting them with sources of expert guidance on retirement finances.

What Causes Retirement-Aged Team Members to Quit?

"What are the top three reasons you would consider leaving your employer?"

Percentage of Respondents, Workers Aged 55-64

I am ready to stop working	**56%**
My pay and benefits are insufficient	**49%**
I feel burnout due to a demanding workload	**42%**
My relationship with my boss	**33%**

Corollary: Almost half of retirement-aged staff are not ready to stop working

What Are Employers Doing to Better Retain Retirement-Aged Staff?

Offering flexible work arrangements (e.g., phased retirement, contract work)

Offering staff in flexible work arrangements affordable health care options

Helping staff assess their financial readiness for retirement

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Beef Up Your Sub-Entry-Level Ranks

Elevating student staffers

Org-based strategies for addressing staffing shortfalls should include ones focused on student workers—traditionally an important source of candidates for entry-level roles.

One example is shown at right. Spurred on by the pressures of the pandemic, a team at Christensen College (a pseudonym) introduced a new student-worker position with expanded responsibilities and higher pay relative to traditional student roles in the office.
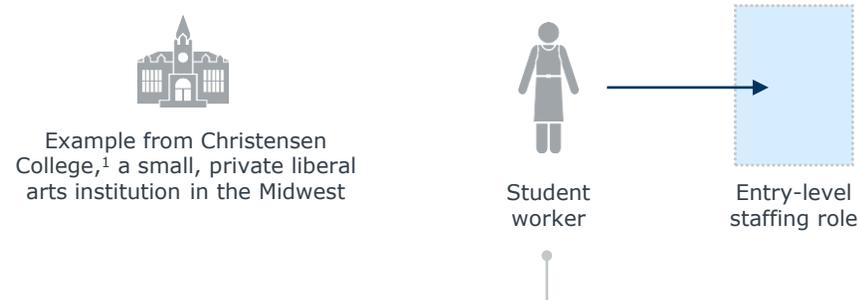
Growing your own talent

One key aspect of the role is that it closely mirrors the actual responsibilities of full-time, entry-level staff. Students having successfully served in the role are able to hit the ground running if/when hired as permanent staff.

Also important is the elevated pay the position offers, which helps counter the waning interest among student workers in roles that some administrators report having witnessed as part of the larger staffing crisis.

Creating a Self-Renewing Talent Pool

Junior Counselor Role a Training Ground and Vetting Opportunity

Example from Christensen College,[1] a small, private liberal arts institution in the Midwest

Student worker

Entry-level staffing role

- Full responsibility for managing a small set of key functions modeled on FT role
- Additional responsibilities include answering phones, greeting visitors
- Role filled by college seniors working as interns
- Elevated pay relative to other student staffers in the same office
- Position could also be filled by regular (non-student, non-intern) staffers

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Build Early-Career Momentum

A clear path forward

While high turnover is, to some extent, unavoidable among staffers in the lower levels of the counselor ranks, you should still be taking steps to hang on to them for as long as you can.

This page shows one approach that can help make that happen. It entails mapping out for your staff a clear progression of skills-development stages they will pass through and corresponding pay increases they will see while working on your team.

Note that the approach described at right has something of the feel of badging or certification programs, which, research shows, hold special appeal for Gen Z.

A generalizable approach

Note as well that structured frameworks for career progression of the sort shown here need not be limited to junior staff or to the acquisition of basic skills; they might also be used to offer more experienced staff the opportunity to develop specialized skill sets and/or to grow into specific roles in your org (e.g., Assistant Dean, Associate Vice Provost).

A Career Ladder for Counselors' Early Years, Based on a Skills-Based Training and Development Program

An Example from Magyar College[1]
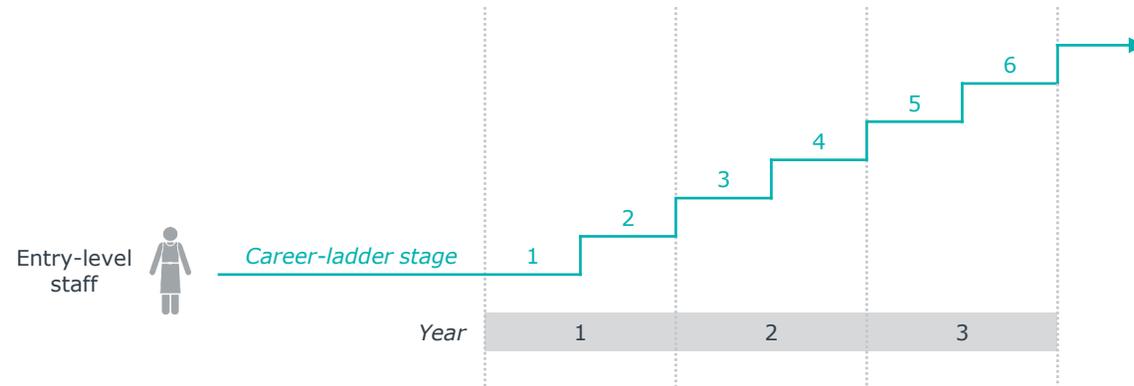
Key features of the approach

- Progression from one stage to the next depends on passing the training component for the previous stage and demonstrating a specified set of related capabilities

- Pay boosted at each stage, amounting to a total increase of 10% over starting salary across the six stages

1) A pseudonym.

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Cross-Train to Create Mobile Capacity

Multiple benefits

As noted elsewhere in this report, employees place a high value on opportunities for lateral moves and, more generally, will eagerly seek out chances to acquire new skills.

Cross-training is an important means of accommodating that desire—and, not incidentally, can also help lessen the impact of staffing shortages. Having employees capable of functioning in more than one capacity allows you to shift them to parts of your team where the need for additional bandwidth is greatest.

Time to train

During times of severe short-staffing, cross-training may be less a question of helping your staff develop new skills and more one of bringing an extra set of hands to some especially beleaguered part of your team—if all your staff members are already running full-tilt, you may not be able to afford to have them off-line for whatever time it takes for them to acquire new, specialized capabilities.

You should, however, incorporate as much skills development in cross-team assignments as demands on your team's capacity permit.

Guiding Principles of Cross-Training

Capitalize on your staff's natural desire to learn new skills
Your team members are eager for the opportunity to acquire new capabilities; leverage their motivation in seeding cross-training partnerships.
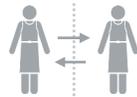
Enable "capacity osmosis"
Staff who are capable of functioning in more than one role can be flexibly deployed to wherever the need for capacity is greatest.

Create positive redundancy
Aim to have more staff than you need trained to work in key functional areas; this will enable you to quickly cover any unexpected spikes in demand or drops in capacity (e.g., due to staff departures).

Foster a culture of collective responsibility
Establish a baseline expectation that staff will be available to pitch in when workload in adjacent areas requires it.

Give Staff the Tools They Need with Navigate

A Comprehensive Student Success Management System

Navigate is the first enterprise-level technology for student success, built based on a decade of research and direct feedback from college and university leaders and users. Navigate brings together students, administrators, advisors, faculty, and other staff in a collaborative network to holistically support students across the college journey.
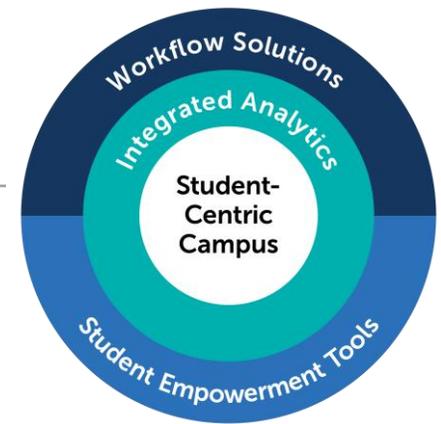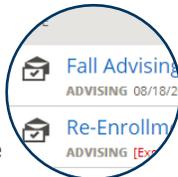

Workflow Solutions

Smart Student Profile
Actionable academic, financial, and behavioral data to support holistic coordinated care

Campaign Management
Mass outreach and multimodal communication at scale

Appointment Scheduling
Flexible timetable for students to schedule within the availability of faculty and staff

Coordinated Care Network
Case management tools and shared documentation help stakeholders coordinate to deliver better support
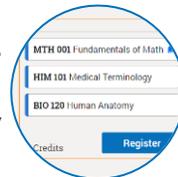
Student Empowerment Tools

Pivotal Moments Path
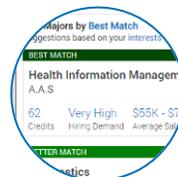In-app onboarding and ongoing guidance organized by due date
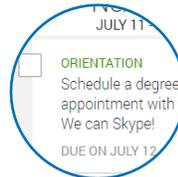
Collaborative Academic Planner
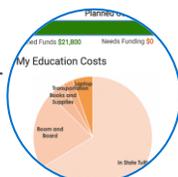Degree maps, course catalog, requirements, and credit tracking with advisor oversight

Student Surveys
Interactive surveys and polls for new student intake, exploring majors, sharing needs and interests, and more
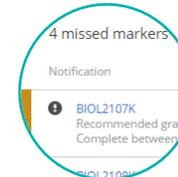
Financial Planner
Help students discover likely expenses and identify funding to mitigate excess debt
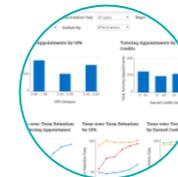
Integrated Analytics

Predictive Analytics
Identify and prioritize student interventions based on likely need for support

Effectiveness Analytics
Impact assessment of interventions across student groups

Population Health Analytics
Key academic progress and performance indicators identify and assess interventions

Historical Trend Analytics
Analyze historical data to support institution-level and program-level decision-making

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Our Partners

850+
Partner institutions

10M+
Students served

Our Impact

3-15%
Typical retention rate improvement

2-12%
Typical graduation rate improvement

Your Next Steps

To schedule a demo and learn how Navigate can help your team support students, please email us at eabssccommunications@eab.com or visit us online at eab.com

EAB

ABOUT EAB

At EAB, our mission is to make education smarter and our communities stronger. We work with thousands of institutions to drive transformative change through data-driven insights and best-in-class capabilities. From kindergarten to college to career, EAB partners with leaders and practitioners to accelerate progress and drive results across five major areas: enrollment, student success, institutional strategy, data analytics, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). We work with each partner differently, tailoring our portfolio of research, technology, and marketing and enrollment solutions to meet the unique needs of every leadership team, as well as the students and employees they serve. Learn more at **eab.com**.