The First Year: A Cultural Shift Towards Improving Student Progress

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Abstract: Student attrition has been a primary focus among higher education institutions for nearly 50 years, yet overall retention and graduation rates continue to be of significant concern. Despite increased attention, ongoing struggles of colleges and universities to effectively address potential barriers to student progress are well-documented. Part of the challenge lies in garnering widespread organizational commitment that establishes student progress as an institutional priority. Along with leadership commitment, broad institutional involvement and adherence to a systematic approach to testing new, innovative solutions are necessary to better position the institution to make clear, evidence-based decisions that improve the student experience. The purpose of this manuscript is to detail one university's cultural shift towards establishing a clear student progress strategy (with particular focus on the first year), and the methodological approach that laid the foundation for a multi-year study of initiatives that resulted in improved student satisfaction, performance, and retention.

Key Words: Student progress, retention initiatives, methodology, process, innovation, higher education, persistence, institutional strategy, attrition, student success

Introduction

Student retention is a critical issue in higher education and institutions are under an increasingly heavy weight of expectations to take measures that will help facilitate their students' success. Of course, a student's likelihood to persist is influenced by a complex set of interpersonal, social, academic, financial, and institutional factors and thus, colleges and universities are often left trying to address challenges over which they seemingly have little control (Simpson, 2004). Yet much opportunity does exist for colleges and universities to raise the bar on delivering an exceptional student experience, and it is their obligation to create processes and policies that support the long-term success of the students they enroll. But it wasn't until the last half century that this institutional responsibility was embraced or even acknowledged.

Seidman (2005) provided a thorough historical perspective of American education over the last 400 years, identifying the emergence of retention as a major institutional focus in the 1960s. During this time, studies tracking reasons for dropout largely concentrated on the individual, with little consideration for the broader complexity of the student experience (Seidman, 2005). Spady's (1971) work was the first to directly bridge the gap, asserting that variables such as educational background, academic performance, and interpersonal relationships influence a

student's decision to persist or drop out. Tinto (1975) expanded Spady's work, emphasizing that a student's likelihood to retain was directly correlated with his or her level of integration, both socially and academically. This opened the door for researchers to begin looking more holistically at the issue of attrition and beyond the view of isolated studies of student characteristics related to drop out.

While there is much research to support Spady's and Tinto's early theories, the changing landscape of higher education (including the rise of distance education and the complexion of the student population) calls for a more comprehensive model that includes factors beyond social and academic integration. Researchers building on these early theories have shown that incoming academic proficiency (Seidman, 2005), financial stability (Swail, 2004), and institutional support (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, & Kinzie, 2008) also greatly influence a student's likelihood to persist, and more recent theories (i.e., Astin, 1993; Braxton, 2000; Milem & Berger, 1997; Titus, 2004) have incorporated these interpersonal, institutional, and environmental circumstances in predicting student outcomes. Despite these gains in a comprehensive understanding of student success outcomes, there still exists a gap in what organizations *know* and what they effectively *do* in terms of improving student progress.

Student Progress and Retention in Online Higher Education Programs

With solid theoretical foundations on student retention nested in traditional campus-based environments and traditional college-aged students, it begs the question as to how generalizable the tenets of these theories are to the diverse educational modalities and student populations that exist today. In a recent review of the literature across various institutions and populations in higher education, Jobe and Lenio (2014) posited that there are many commonalities in the challenges of attrition risk (i.e., increasing student support needs), and asserted that these similarities outnumber the unique differences. Recent research grounded in the early works of Spady, Tinto, Seidman, and others have reinforced the principles of these theories and the utility to diverse populations and institutions. While most barriers to student success may be shared issues and the theoretical bases may apply broadly, for the purposes of this article, it is worthwhile to highlight some of the unique challenges that online, non-traditional students face in successfully completing their programs. In fact, some of the aspects of online learning that draw students to that modality can also be the very aspects that pose additional challenges to success. Boston, Ice, and Gibson (2011) discussed the flexibility of scheduling (with most programs offering asynchronous courses as opposed to the set time and location of traditional classes). Additionally, the authors note that many online programs offer broader enrollment access since they are not limited by physical space. With this, adults who are often juggling multiple responsibilities are often encouraged by both the flexibility and the ability to attend at the pace they need to meet their other obligations. Of course, these are often major advantages for online learners, but they can also pose risks that jeopardize persistence and degree completion. It is precisely because nontraditional students have competing priorities outside of school that may cause them to withdrawal even from more flexible online programs (Cochran, Campbell, Baker, & Leeds, 2014). Likewise, broader enrollment access may grant educational opportunities to many who may otherwise be left out, but this raises risks in terms of academic and technical readiness. Finally, the online format typically allows students to learn and demonstrate mastery of the subject matter anytime from anywhere; direct contact (in real-time) between students and faculty may be rare. This also poses a significant risk as students may feel disconnected and less committed to completing their studies (Croft, Dalton, & Grant, 2010).

Though predominantly online institutions may struggle with direct connection to their students and competing with external demands on students' time, several studies have assessed

whether those challenges translate to lower achievement for distance learners. A U.S. Department of Education (2009) meta-analysis lends support to the notion that the quality of the online academic experience often exceeds that of traditional face-to-face learning. In support of this, Templeton, Ballenger, and Thompson (2015) highlighted previous research that has shown students overwhelmingly rate quality of their experience in online learning as good or better than traditional learning, and measures of student performance (i.e., test scores, grades) are statistically equivalent between traditional and online programs. Despite the evidence that academic quality does not suffer in delivering courses online, there is ample evidence that online students fair better when support resources are geared toward their specific needs (Kuh, et al., 2008). As such, distance education institutions are compelled to structure a far-reaching student-centered environment, rich with resources specific to the needs of students who rarely or never step foot on a physical campus. Maathuis-Smith, Wellington, Cossham, Fields, Irvine, Welland, and Innes (2010) call on distance education institutions to continually assess student challenges and develop initiatives that address the risks of drop out. This paper represents an answer to that call and details one online institution's commitment to a new, better approach to delivering an exceptional student experience.

Increased Focus on the First Year

Spady is perhaps best known for his initial 1971 theory on student attrition, but his interest in dropout rates started with his earlier dissertation work, *Peer Integration and Academic Success: The Dropout Process among Chicago Freshmen*, which centered on the problems he observed in first year retention at the University of Chicago (Hader, 2011). His doctoral work was the impetus for decades of research that has informed educational leaders of the unique risks to students who are just beginning their programs.

Among these risks is the incongruence between expectations and experience of new students. A recent study of undergraduates in Australia revealed that fewer than 1/3 of students entering the university had realistic expectations about the amount of effort it would require to be academically successful (Scutter, Palmer, Luzeckyj, Burke da Silva, & Brinkworth, 2011). Perhaps an even greater challenge for students entering online programs, Brown, Keppell, Hughes, Hard, Shillington, & Smith (2012) concluded from qualitative analysis of narrative data that students beginning their distance education programs often have a "false sense of security" with the flexibility and loose structure of the virtual format. In other words, expectations are impractical and the rigors of the coursework may catch students off guard, leading to dropout or failure.

Because of this lack of planning due to unrealistic expectations, institutions (especially those online) often benefit from deliberate efforts to engage students as early as possible. Kuh et al. (2008) asserted that students are most impacted by early immersion into University activities. They found that first year performance and retention were positively related to students participating in processes that are academically engaging (i.e., learning communities). Not surprisingly, the more students are involved in the academic opportunities of the school, the more likely they are to be successful. Other researchers (i.e., Ali & Kohun, 2007) have highlighted the benefits of engaging new students socially, in turn building positive regard for the institution and the desire to stay connected within its circles. This, of course, underscores one of the greater challenges for online institutions as compared to their campus-based counterparts. It is easier to create touch points face-to-face with students, encouraging engagement and wrapping social networking around the activities that increase commitment to the university. As such, it is perhaps even more imperative that predominantly and fully online programs dedicate resources to building efficacy, identity, and connectedness among students, thereby reinforcing their commitment to persist and graduate. Without question, feelings of isolation in the online environment negatively

impact satisfaction and the overall educational experience; online students who do not feel a keen sense of belonging (especially in the first year) in the classroom and in the broader university community risk dropping out short of attaining their educational goals (Thomas, Herbert, & Teras, 2014).

A Call to Action

Transitioning to postsecondary education and navigating the challenges of college is difficult for many students and higher education researchers, policy makers, and thought leaders have called upon institutions to take an active role in bridging the gap. Whereas the accountability for success used to fall predominantly on the student, institutions are now expected to share in that responsibility, developing programs, processes, and resources that reduce the risk of failure. Levitz and Noel (1998) asserted that an institution's reputation is based on the achievements of its students and as such, colleges and universities must embrace their role in partnering with students in their success.

Raisman (2013), in his review of multiple institutions and thousands of students, found that those who had dropped out of college overwhelmingly gave institutional reasons for doing so. Specifically, 84% of the attrition rate observed could be attributed to unsatisfactory institutional support. The top two reasons for dropout were 1) perceived lack of concern for the student and 2) poor service. Raisman argues that institutions that are failing to help students progress and graduate are not holding up their end of the deal and therefore, need to take charge of improving outcomes or risk losing federal funding.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU, 2005) states that "a culture of high expectations is also a culture of mutual expectations" such that individuals inherently have a responsibility for their own educational success, but institutions share in that responsibility via the support they provide throughout the student lifecycle. The following section details a case example of one university that embodies this philosophy; Walden University enacted a cultural shift in the prioritization of student progress efforts that resulted in increased student satisfaction, performance, and retention.

A Strategy for First Year Student Progress

Walden University was founded in 1970 as a distance education school, with a primary focus on supporting graduate degree completion for nontraditional students who had encountered difficulties in brick and mortar settings. Today, Walden offers over 150 full degree and certificate programs. Some of these programs require residency, field experience, and practicum hours, but Walden programs continue to be fully or predominantly online, comprised mostly of nontraditional undergraduate and graduate adult learners.

In 2011, a major cultural shift was initiated at Walden University. Burkholder, Lenio, Holland, Seidman, Neal, Middlebrook, and Jobe (2013) first referenced the University's significant transformation and commitment to prioritizing student progress, particularly in the first year. The authors detail the development of a university-wide retention team, the creation of a new position dedicated to leading ongoing research and innovation, the development of the methodological approach for investigating and measuring outcomes, and the cyclical nature of the process that ensures continuous assessment and improvement. This new process (designated Walden's First Year Student Progress (FYSP) strategic plan) is illustrated in Figure 1.
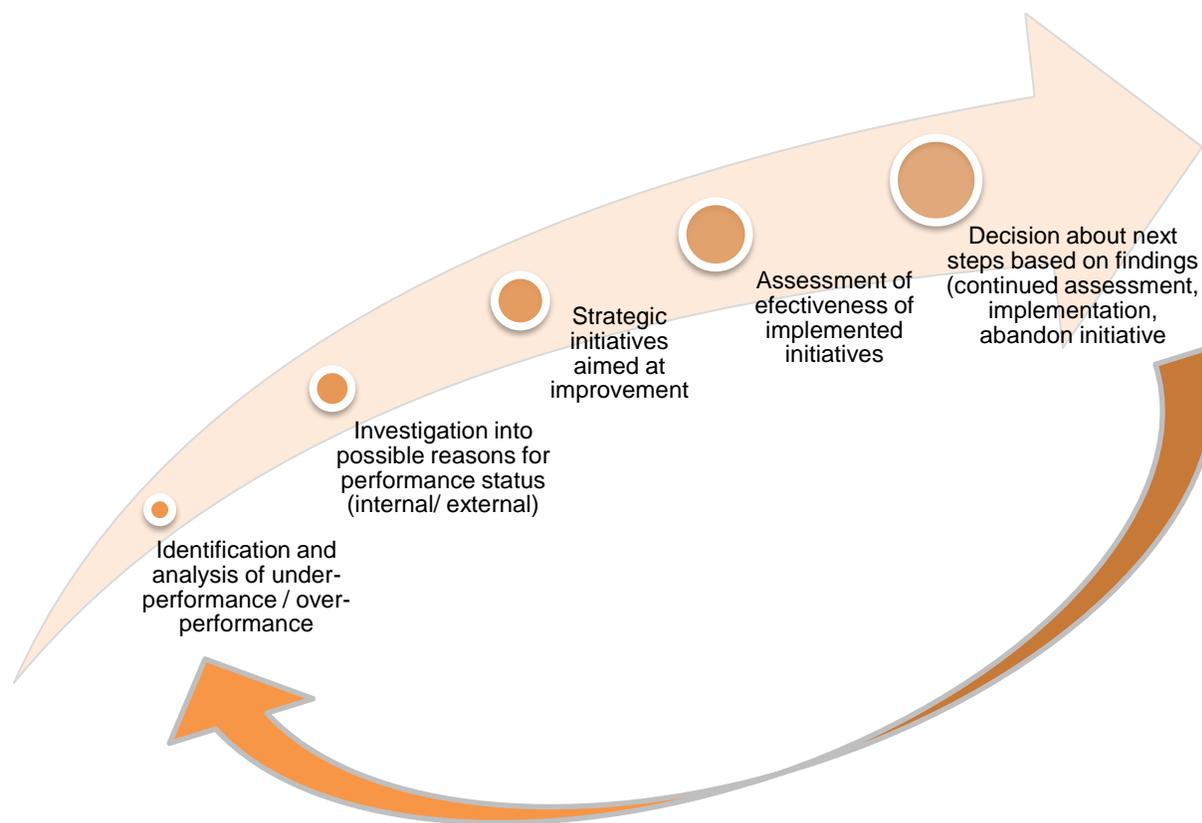
Figure 1. First year student progress systematic methodology

It is important to note that prior to these institutional advances, many retention efforts were launched across the University, but there lacked a systematic, methodological approach that would allow for controlled testing and isolating the impact of changes that were implemented. Thus, there was little opportunity to utilize these efforts towards broader decision-making for the University. Further, given Walden University is a highly matrixed organization, the`re was difficulty with communication such that one department was often unaware of what another department was doing with regard to student experience efforts. Therefore, institutional knowledge about pockets of improvement or areas of underperformance was inconsistently shared and duplication of efforts was common.

The inefficiencies in project implementation and the so-called "spaghetti-on-the-wall" approach (throwing out a bunch of changes, hoping a few of them would "stick") had led to more questions than answers, and the institutional silos were stifling communication and collaboration. The institution was data-rich, but information-poor, leaving administrators stalled in their ability to roll out broad initiatives for improvement. The "old way" of approaching the student experience was insufficient and Walden leadership recognized a new, better approach to understanding the student experience was needed. This was a turning point in the institution's prioritization of retention and student progress efforts. Swail (2004) emphasized the importance of a declaration by leadership to rally around the student experience, and Walden's CEO and President championed the cause and called for a systematic approach to making improvements.

The inaugural First Year Student Progress (FYSP) summit was held in Fall, 2011 with over seventy representatives from over twenty-five departments, creating a cross-functional,

collaborative foundation for this new strategy. The President of the institution set the expectations, tone, and charge (which continues to guide FYSP strategic planning through present day). The prioritization of this new research and development effort was clear and teams were eager to be involved.

The Process for Evidence-Based Decision-Making

The "new way," illustrated in Figure 1, provided a clear, concise method to studying ways to improve student progress. Specifically, five key stages were defined: identification, development, execution, assessment, and decision. Table 1 gives an overview of each stage.

Table 1. *The First Year Student Progress Process Stages*

Stage of FYSP Methodology	Key Components of Each Stage
Identification	Where are the gaps and barriers to the student experience? Where are the high points in the student experience?
Investigation	Examining reasons why students are experiencing pitfalls and successes narrows the focus for creative solutions.
Execution	Strategic initiatives are developed to address those gaps and barriers or leverage positive efforts.
Assessment	Success measures are defined upfront; initiatives are developed and executed in a way that allows for clear, controlled testing of impact.
Decision	Finally, results are used for evidence-based decision making. At this stage, the decision may be to continue testing if results are promising, but inconclusive, move the initiative from pilot to permanent if results are strong and consistent, or abandon the initiative altogether if there is little or no evidence of substantial positive impact.

Identification. Prior to the launch of FYSP, deep dives into the internal data were scarce and problems were typically identified by student complaints, course evaluations, or aggregate retention reports. However, the new approach called for deliberate observation of the first year, utilizing institutional data to drill down on the pain points and high points in the student experience.

Investigation. Once these positive and negative junctures were identified, much time was spent delving into the internal and external data on potential reasons for the experience and possible solutions to address the issue. Certainly the higher education retention literature is vast and offers many insights into explaining student engagement and progress. This knowledge base coupled with the University's own unique student data (both qualitative and quantitative) was essential to considering the best strategies for making improvements.

Execution. Core teams (discussed in detail later in this manuscript) collaborated on the design, sample, and procedures to test for each initiative. Careful consideration was given to disruption to other processes or program-level assessments. The sample and method were determined by feasibility, best fit, timeline, and the ability to isolate impact. For example, if major program changes or other extraneous circumstances threatened to confound the results, initiatives were tested elsewhere so a "clean" assessment of effect could be made.

Assessment. One of the biggest shifts in how pilots were conducted through FYSP (vs. prior) was the precedence placed on building an assessment plan up front in accordance with the research questions and hypotheses for each study. It was of utmost importance that effectiveness could be measured in a way that provided confidence in the results so that evidence-based decisions guided the next steps for each initiative. Assessment plans varied based on the design of the study. Pilot assessments included descriptive data, comparisons between groups, and assessments of relationships. Experimental test and control was utilized when appropriate. Year-over-year comparisons, like-term comparisons, correlational and regression analyses, thematic analyses for qualitative data, and Chi-square tests were all used. Every FYSP project incorporated a comprehensive assessment approach with multiple measurements and analyses.

Decision. As projects move through these stages, internal communication is prioritized to keep stakeholders informed of the status and progress of each initiative. Once the decision point is reached, executive leadership is presented with the details of the pilot and key findings, including return on investment. One of three options is determined at this stage: 1) abandon/table the initiative, 2) continue to test the initiative (with the current approach or by tweaking aspects of the design, sample, or procedures), or 3) transition the initiative from pilot to permanent. Initiatives are generally "abandoned or tabled" if they yield neutral results or if there is minimal positive impact. In such cases, leaders often decide to hold off on further exploration in favor of directing resources to potentially more promising initiatives. Continued testing is often desired if results are promising (but mixed) or if results are positive in one population and generalizability is uncertain. Initiatives that are transitioned from pilot to permanent have typically shown consistent (replicated), positive impact on the student experience and there is evidence to suggest those effects would generalize to other populations within the University.

Finally, it is the cyclical nature of the FYSP process that ensures quality and sustainability of the initiative. Whether pilots are abandoned/tabled, continually tested, or advanced for broad implementation across the institution, it is the responsibility of the institution to ensure fidelity of transition and value of the initiative over time. In the first few years of FYSP, issues arose when retention-improving initiatives were transitioned to permanent (and thus, transferred out of FYSP to the appropriate department for longer-term management), but not implemented in the same way they were tested. In other words, elements of what worked well for students were lost in translation and in some cases, the initiatives lost their impact altogether. Thus, a gap existed that threatened to eliminate the benefit the initiatives had produced. In terms of the long-term value of the initiatives, it is reasonable to assume that an intervention may be beneficial at one point in time in the organization's lifecycle, but require a different approach to produce those same benefits in the future. As the student population changes, as well as the higher education landscape, demands of the market, and regulatory environment, institutions must continue to assess the needs of students and the policies and processes that create pathways for success. Without this cyclical examination, colleges and universities risk resting on their achievements (rather than continuing to raise the bar) and making presumptions that those "wins" will always sufficiently fill the gaps in the student experience.

Initiative Core Teams: Where the Magic Lies

The strength of Walden's FYSP methodology lies within the collaborative, cross-functional nature of the core teams that drive each initiative. Core teams lead the ideation, initiative development, pilot execution, and replication/revision in subsequent phases. They are deliberately kept small, with 5-6 team members representing various departments and levels of the organization, and they are charged with being innovative, student-centered, agile, expedient, comprehensive, and accelerated in their development and execution of the project. Higher

education employees are often confronted with competing demands on time and resources and bureaucratic challenges. Faculty, staff, and administrators struggle to prioritize extra research and development activities in the midst of their day-to-day obligations. Yet the challenge of the FYSP team was not in getting colleagues to participate; rather, the challenge was in keeping the core teams small and agile in the face of numerous faculty, staff, and administrators requesting to be part of the process.

The core teams took on a life of their own, leveling the playing field in terms of rank and status and offering all members the opportunity to share ideas and debate solutions to challenges identified. The best concepts surfaced as a function of the unique perspectives brought to each team from various student-facing groups. New viewpoints to old problems were brought to light and oftentimes resulted in two or more pathways to test within a given initiative.

Continued Progress: Five Years Later

The FYSP strategic plan and cultural shift that accompanied its introduction in 2011 continues to drive research and development innovation for the University. Now five years later, FYSP has delivered over thirty initiatives and has a record of achievement in generating positive results for students and the institution. Through this new approach, Walden has been deliberate in turning *data* into *information* into *action*. While not all initiatives tested have resulted in a decision to implement broadly across the University, much insight has been gained in what does and does not improve the student experience in a meaningful way. In fact, an argument can be made that even when initiatives do not result in significantly positive outcomes, the ability to make immediate, clear decisions about *not* continuing down such a path saves the University valuable time, money, and resources that can be redirected to other opportunities. Of course, identifying changes that provide students with a richer experience that helps them meet their educational and career goals are very important, and through the FYSP strategic plan many efforts (i.e., welcome kits, new student orientation, peer tutoring, course previews) have been expanded or transitioned to permanence.

In line with the theoretical foundations and current research on retention in higher education, over the past five years FYSP has launched initiatives aimed at improving academic preparedness, expectation-setting, social integration, engagement, institutional identity, technological readiness, financial literacy and planning, dedicated support resources, self-efficacy, and work-life-school balance. The focus has remained on the first year experience, though the research team has recognized the importance and incorporated studies focused on engaging students earlier, before day one of their first term. Not surprisingly, initiatives aimed at students preparing to start their programs have resulted in some of the largest impacts on students' self-reported positive emotions and overall satisfaction, as well as retention (defined by actual matriculation into the first term).

Finally, it is important to note that with organizational change often comes strife. The vision and inspiration of the leadership team to enact this cultural shift towards a systematic approach to address retention, with the collective goal of improving the student experience, was crucial to the success of the FYSP strategic plan. The cross-functional nature, the opportunity to bring ideas to the table and help drive improvements, and the transparency of the process led to widespread commitment to the "new way" across all levels of the organization. FYSP continues to drive thought leadership and institutional improvements through this systematic process, building upon the knowledge gained since inception and continuing to identify innovative pathways as advancements are made in higher education.

Conclusions

A focus on the first year experience in higher education is certainly not a new concept and many universities have developed courses and programs directed at establishing a successful first year for students. There are now scientific journals and professional conferences dedicated specifically to better understanding and improving the first year. Still there is much to learn about the complexities of students' reasons for suspending their educational pursuits once they've committed to an institution.

Layne, Boston, and Ice (2013) provided an interesting view into the current trends of "shopping," "stopping," and "swirling" among college students. Present-day students (as compared to students fifty years ago when Spady and Tinto were developing their theories of student persistence) are more apt to de-commit for a number of reasons, with little chance for the institution to prevent it. Specifically, enrollment teams today must adjust to prospective students who are researching their options for school, often staying anonymous to the institution unless they decide to enroll. These "shoppers" have, in effect, flipped the relationship in a way that makes them the "buyer" and the institution the "seller" (a reversal from the traditional notion that prospective students are trying to make their case for an institution choosing them for enrollment). Similarly, it is often hard for institutions to predict "stoppers," who suddenly drop out for a variety of reasons. Again, these are not students whom the institution has asked to leave; rather, they are leaving on their own accord and colleges are often left trying to understand their decision after-the-fact. Finally, the relatively new phenomenon of "swirling" adds another dimension to the already complex landscape of student behavior. "Swirlers" are difficult to track as they move in and out of active student status and often change from one institution to another. Earlier theorists were never faced with addressing this type of behavior, but today institutions must pay attention to these trends and identify solutions that deter students from coming and going haphazardly.

Certainly these new trends in student behavior only add to the complexity of engaging and retaining students once they enroll with an institution. Many colleges and universities who are spending a great deal of time and money on retention efforts are likely left feeling like it's "two steps forward, two steps back" as they solve for one problem, only to have a new challenge arise. Still, as enrollments rise and globalization expands (Burkholder and Holland, 2014), new opportunities surface for retention teams to anchor their efforts in a systematic approach to testing new initiatives. Kuh, et al. (2008) recommended a comprehensive approach for engaging students early and often, entrenched in a university culture that is student-centered. The work of Walden University over the past five years reflects this realization through the First Year Student Progress strategic plan. FYSP serves as a model for how institutions of higher education (both online and campus-based, domestic and international) can inspire employees to commit to a common, irresistible cause, establish sound methodology that provides confidence and wisdom for institutional decisions, and effectively brings about change for the betterment of students.

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