

# Block and Tackling in Higher Education



Written by Victor Brown

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Of all the problems in higher education that are in most need of solution, I cannot conceive of any more glaring than the failure of so many students to obtain a degree, despite the enormous costs involved in even one year of college.

The statistics are well known and I referenced them here ([http://seethruedu.com/welcome-students-members-of-the-class-of-\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_ofwell-we-really-arent-sure/](http://seethruedu.com/welcome-students-members-of-the-class-of-_____ofwell-we-really-arent-sure/)). Nationally, fewer than 60% of entering students obtain a degree *within six years*, and the percentage that graduate within four years is below 50%. The problem is most pronounced in the early stages of a college career, where only about 75% of students return for their second year.

There of course has been much handwringing over this state of affairs, and not least by me. I have written many commentaries for SeeThruEdu (<http://seethruedu.com/author/vic-brown/>), the Martin Center for Academic Renewal (<https://www.jamesgmartin.center/author/vicbrown/>) and National Review (<http://www.nationalreview.com/author/vic-brown>) on the issues of higher education, attempting to contribute to the conversation based on my experiences in business and later as a member of a liberal arts college faculty.

If colleges continue to accept students when they know full well that roughly half will not receive a degree, or receive it in a timely fashion, something really has to be done. Failure to do so might suggest that institutions of higher education are more concerned with their financial wellbeing than with doing everything they can to help the students realize their goals.

I don't think this is the case, but perhaps the colleges don't know how to go about developing a solution for the problem. Let me suggest at the kickoff to the football season that it has to be done in the same way a successful football team wins games — by good blocking and tackling. The long TD passes are nice, and the fans love to see them, but the underpinnings of the win are really

found “in the trenches”.

My suggestion is that the administrators of higher education institutions examine each of their primary activities in terms of its impact on “student failure to complete” rates, and to bore in on this as their primary measuring stick. Where changes to each process are identified that would promote better student retention, implement them immediately.

This would have to begin with the **admissions** process, of course. I know it's a complex process to attract students who will help build the campus community, but a first year retention rate of approximately 75% is a failure, by any measure. In my observation, the critical discussion during the admission process was between the Admissions VP and the CFO — how many students do we need to admit, and at what discount rate, in order to meet our budget for the coming fiscal year? There needs to be an equally important addition to the discussion — how many students, at what discount rate, and *who statistically are likely to stay with us and keep up with the academic demands made on them?* These are the students who should be admitted, income targets be damned. Go after that problem with aggressive cost reduction. Allowing students to matriculate with a high likelihood of academic failure is ethically repugnant.

The **financial aid** process is closely aligned with admissions. It's one thing for the college to discount its own tuition in order to be competitive with the marketplace, but the school must keep in mind the impact of the loans on students. These loans need to be repaid. How many students drop out of college because they fear the mounting loan balances, and don't see a clear path toward repayment? Do these students (and their parents) fully understand the statistics around graduation rates and loan default rates? (<http://www.nationalreview.com/phi-beta-cons/431049/student-loans-repayment-terms-ignorance>) They should, and it is the responsibility of admissions and financial aid to

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spell this out clearly. Failure to do so might suggest that the college values the student's financial contributions more than their need to be academically successful. Better to have a smaller, more successful class than to extract money from a larger class with built-in attrition.

**Faculty members** comprise the essence of the product that the college is selling, of course. Do students understand that half of their courses will be taught by low paid adjuncts (<https://www.jamesgmartin.center/2014/10/why-neglect-70-percent-of-your-workforce-notes-from-an-adjunct/>) who have no long term skin in this college's game? Once realized, does this realization contribute to the dropout rate? Do students know that their college is highly unlikely to have a faculty that "looks like America"? That shopworn phrase is constantly trotted out to encourage diversity in employment and elected representation, but you will be hard pressed to find a true diversity of views on campus. Do students grow tired of the overwhelming liberal bias of faculty, and elect to do something else with their lives?

Does the **curriculum** encourage students to stay the course and graduate on time? Does the curriculum offer a good balance of "vocational" knowledge with a broad humanistic perspective? Or are the courses often of little value other than to support the highly esoteric interest of some faculty, and have little impact beyond the campus? Do students sense this as well?

Is the **Career Services** department involved with students beginning in the first year of their college career? They should be, but in my experience this department is passive, waiting for students to seek them out – usually in the fall of the senior year, when the "I need a job" panic begins to set in. At the prices that colleges charge today there is little time for "delightful sampling" of various courses. A student needs to be guided in the career identification process, be told to only take required electives during the first two years

in order to save electives that support their eventual major without having to stay for a 5th or even 6th year. Internships are an important part of the process, and need to be secured in areas that will assist the student in validating their career thinking. In short, Career Services staff should be involved at the very outset, as I have written here (<https://www.jamesgmartin.center/2016/06/welcome-to-freshman-orientation-now-meet-your-career-counselor/>). Students may very well see the road ahead more clearly, again encouraging them to complete their degrees in a timely way.

If a graduate begins to work for General Motors, and starts to not show up for work, he will find his career there to be quite short lived. The same should hold true for **attendance** in college. Be in class, or leave the school. College course work is the preparation for a career. Get used to it, choose courses wisely, and be there for every class. Some students say that a course isn't worth the time. If true, let that surface on the student evaluation of the course, and let the school deal with that faculty member. The more that students feel their courses are valuable, the more likely they are to remain in school.

Does the epidemic of drinking on campus bother some students enough that they depart school early, or does drinking itself impair them to the degree that they are unable to complete their program? Probably some of both, I would say. The horrible incident last year at Penn State (<http://seethruedu.com/minimum-drinking-age-we-need-a-minimum-college-age/>) is just one example of the damage alcohol is causing among these teenagers who have been thrust into a non-supervised environment. Colleges need to take a zero tolerance approach to drinking on campus. Just because a student is 21, that doesn't mean that he has a right to drink on campus; the college sets those rules. He can drink off campus and let any unfortunate results of drunken behavior be dealt with by the police.

There are a lot of pieces here, to be sure, and I don't

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claim to have the answer to all of them. But each and every one of these collegiate building blocks should be ruthlessly examined under the bright light of their impact on the number of students who obtain degrees. This is the entire goal of higher education, and the current situation cannot be tolerated.

[For more about the author, visit VictorBrown.net](http://VictorBrown.net)