Motivating and Retaining the Murky Middle: A Social-Psychological Intervention
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Project Type: Student Success

Abstract: Data from the Student Success Collaborative (SSC) reveals that, in terms of retention interventions, students who have completed their first year with GPAs in the 2.0-3.0 range—designated as the “murky middle”—are an underserved population. At most institutions of higher education, a disproportionate amount of support goes to students at the extremes—those who are thriving and those at risk. With proper intervention, however, the students in the murky middle can be retained. Central to student retention and to our intervention are the engagement concepts of mindsets for and perceived utility value of learning. The latter allows students to connect immediate learning with long-term benefits while the former ensures their persistence in the face of the challenges associated with post-secondary education. Unlike most retention programs that focus on interventions that occur outside the classroom, our proposed two-phase intervention addresses retention at the level of existing courses and combines course redesign with faculty development. The target course for our intervention is ENG 122: College Composition—identified by the SSC as the top predictor of academic failure at UNC.