



THE NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON STUDENT RETENTION

Hosted by the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange at The University of Oklahoma

The National Symposium on Student Retention

October 19-22, 2026

Program Information

The full interactive conference program will be available in October

NSSR

NSSR offers a complete educational experience exploring the latest evidence-based research on post-secondary retention and graduation. All concurrent sessions will be presented live, providing many opportunities for networking and collaboration among colleagues from diverse fields and institutions.

NSSR Overview

All times are Central Time

Sunday, October 18, 2026

4:00–6:00 pm On-site Registration & Check-in

Monday, October 19, 2026

9:00 am–6:00 pm On-site Registration & Check-in

1:00–4:30 pm Pre-conference Workshops (*additional fees required*)

4:30–6:00 pm Welcome Reception

Tuesday, October 20, 2026

7:00 am–4:45 pm On-site Registration & Check-in

7:00–8:30 am Morning Refreshments

8:30–10:00 am Plenary Session and Keynote Address

10:15 am–12:30 pm Concurrent Sessions

12:30–2:30 pm Lunch on your own

2:30–4:45 pm Concurrent Sessions

4:45–5:45 pm Exhibitor Visits

4:45–5:45 pm Social

Wednesday, October 21, 2026

7:00 am–4:45 pm On-site Registration & Check-in

7:00–8:30 am Morning Refreshments

8:30–10:00 am Plenary Session and Keynote Address

10:15 am–12:30 pm Concurrent Sessions

12:30–2:30 pm Lunch on your own

2:30–4:45 pm Concurrent Sessions

4:45–5:45 pm Poster Session & Poster Judging

4:45–5:45 pm Social

Thursday, October 22, 2026

8:00–9:00 am Best Practices Awards Breakfast

9:00–11:30 am On-site Registration & Check-in

9:15–11:30 am Concurrent Sessions

11:30 am Conference Adjourns

Coffee Talks

Moderators of these one-hour informal sessions will guide conversations on pressing issues in higher education.

Facilitated Discussions

These sessions are led by facilitators who will introduce the topic and briefly share insights from their experience. The majority of the session will be dedicated to discussions, with time at the end to summarize the conversations.

Papers

All paper proposals went through a multi-step review process, including peer-review. Those who received the highest scores were invited to present at the National Symposium on Student Retention. The papers will be presented during the Concurrent Sessions. We will announce three award-winning papers during the Best Practices Awards Breakfast on Thursday morning. Each award comes with a plaque or trophy. The awards are: Best Practices in Student Retention, Institutional Research Leadership in Student Retention, and Director's Award.

Posters

Join us on Wednesday to visit with poster presenters about their research and strategies for helping their students succeed. The exhibit hall format offers a great opportunity for networking with your colleagues. Posters will be judged during the poster session for the CSRDE Best Poster Award, which includes a plaque. The winner will be announced during the Best Practices Awards Breakfast session on Thursday.

Tutorials

The tutorials will be presented during the Concurrent Sessions. These sessions will present effective models and offer strategies and solutions.

Vendor Presentations

Several sponsors will be presenting their research and discussing tools and strategies to help colleagues in their student success efforts. These sessions will be presented during the Concurrent Sessions.

Monday, 10/19/2026

1:00–4:30 p.m.

Pre-conference Workshop (1/2 Day)

Poplar Hall

Managing Your Memory: The Second Responsibility of a Good Student

Michael Morsches, Moraine Valley Community College

Grant Matthews, Lane Community College

Abstract: Memory is an integral part of the educational process. Although some aspects of memory are necessary for learning, learning and memory are two distinct constructs. Successful college students have three primary responsibilities in their educational process: 1) Learning at an appropriate level, 2) Managing what they have learned in their memory, and 3) Proving that they have learned (Morsches & Matthews, 2023). This workshop will focus on the second responsibility, that of managing memory. The workshop will have three components. The first will be a philosophical and psychological examination of the construct of memory. We will examine historical explanations of how memory works, hypotheses regarding where memories are stored, and examples of how memory contributes to our very identities. The second component will focus on memory strategies and techniques. This exercise is very practical, and participants will learn how their memory capacities can increase rapidly. The third component will address how memory then ties into the first and third responsibilities, learning and proving respectively. This will be a very interactive workshop, and participants will find a great deal of value for their students and themselves.

Monday, 10/19/2026

1:00–4:30 p.m.

Pre-conference Workshop (1/2 Day)

Providence Hall

Operationalizing “Putting Students First”: A Collaborative Framework for Student Success and Retention

Tanya Stack, University of North Carolina Wilmington

Karen Cassidy, University of North Carolina Wilmington

Tamara Cooper, University of North Carolina Wilmington

DiAnna Washington, University of North Carolina Wilmington

Abstract: University of North Carolina Wilmington's Student Success & Retention (SSR) team has developed a cross divisional partnership model that operationalizes the Putting Students First framework to strengthen student connection, persistence, and completion. This session highlights how SSR integrates the university's four dimensions of student success—academic achievement, career preparedness, engagement, and holistic wellbeing—into a unified, campuswide retention strategy. Through a cross-campus collaboration panel and interactive workshop, participants will explore the full ecosystem of student success: designing data informed early alert systems that students trust, removing administrative barriers through evidence-based policy advocacy, and building intentional outreach campaigns that balance CRM automation with meaningful human connection. The session will also demonstrate methods for authentically co-designing solutions with students to ensure interventions reflect real needs and lived experiences. Attendees will leave with actionable tools, including sample outreach language, campaign concepts, student voice engagement strategies, and a customizable resolution workflow adaptable to their institutional context.

Monday, 10/19/2026

1:00–4:30 p.m.

Pre-conference Workshop (1/2 Day)

Stratford Hall

Punch Positive: How Boxing Saves Lives and Strengthens Retention

Lita Mae Button, Punch Positive

Abstract: Student success is deeply connected to physical, emotional, and social well-being—yet many individuals remain disengaged due to fear, low confidence, and lack of connection. This interactive session introduces Punch Positive™, a non-contact boxing framework designed to improve resilience, engagement, and long-term adherence to healthy behaviors. Led by Registered Nurse and boxing coach Lita Mae “Badass” Button, this workshop draws on over a decade of experience supporting individuals with Parkinson’s disease, trauma, and chronic health conditions. Participants will explore how accessible, movement-based strategies can improve mental health, build self-efficacy, and foster community—key drivers of retention and success. Attendees will leave with practical tools to implement in student success and wellness programs, helping individuals reconnect to their strength, their confidence, and their capacity to persist.

Monday, 10/19/2026

1:00–4:30 p.m.

Pre-conference Workshop (1/2 Day)

Merrimac

RISE for Retention: Building Staff Resilience to Fuel Student Success

Connie Horton, Pepperdine University

Abstract: In the high-stakes environment of student retention, professionals often focus so intently on student persistence that they neglect their own. Between increasing administrative demands and the emotional labor of supporting a diverse student body, burnout isn't just a risk—it's a reality. However, institutional retention begins with staff sustainability. This half-day pre-conference provides retention professionals a dedicated space to pause, reflect, and operationalize research-based resilience strategies. Grounded in the proven framework of Pepperdine University's Resilience-Informed Skills Education (RISE) Program, this session moves beyond the "self-care" buzzword to provide a clinical and practical toolkit for long-term holistic health and well-being.

Monday, 10/19/2026

4:30–6:00 p.m.

Monticello

Welcome Reception

Abstract: We invite you to join us for the Welcome Reception in Monticello. Enjoy hors d'oeuvres and cocktails (cash bar) while getting to know your NSSR colleagues. PLEASE NOTE: The reception is included with your registration. Badges are required. Guests may join you for \$50 per person. See one of the conference staff for details or questions.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
8:30–10:00 a.m.

Poplar/Providence/Stratford Hall

Keynote Address: Deep Data: Moving Beyond Disaggregation to Close Equity Gaps

Janet Oh, Data Strategist | Public Speaker | Higher Education Leader

Abstract: When it comes to data, equity work in higher education has focused on disaggregating student outcomes data to reveal equity gaps. Disaggregation shows us only where those gaps exist, not why. In this keynote address, Dr. Oh will introduce her Deep Data framework, an approach rooted in participatory action research that is key to uncovering the root causes behind inequities in retention. This framework offers campus constituents, from students to frontline staff to senior administrators, a model for engaging in the kind of coordinated action this work requires.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
10:15–11:15 a.m.

Coffee Talk

Monticello

Closing the Gap Between Terms: A Scalable Interim Session Model for Student Retention

Cherie Meador, Moraine Valley Community College

Abstract: Community colleges often face stop-out patterns between regular terms, and students can easily lose momentum when seeking to complete programs. Moraine Valley Community College developed an interim session model that offers accelerated online courses that allow students to stay on track or get ahead in achieving their academic goals. For the last six years, the institution has scaled from pilot to practice, a scheduling and retention solution. During the talk, data/outcomes, and a scalable "interim session", equity-focused model that appeals to many student populations will be shared with attendees.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
10:15–11:15 a.m.

Presentation

Poplar Hall

Continued Conversation With Janet Oh, Ph.D.

Abstract: This concurrent session is available for participants who would like to continue the conversation with Dr. Oh.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
10:15–11:15 a.m.

Coffee Talk

Stratford Hall

Financial Literacy as a Career Readiness, Retention-Focused Tool

Griffin North, Midway University
Jebediah Gorham, Midway University
Michael Michalisin, Midway University

Abstract: Financial literacy is an essential component of career readiness and student retention. Despite its importance, financial wellness is not explicitly included in the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) core competency framework. Our work draws upon the Financial Literacy and Education Commission's (FLEC) Best Practices and explores how financial knowledge shapes students' capacity to navigate early career transitions and manage education-related debt. Targeted interventions at our institution include a general education course and financial literacy touchpoints that examine forces related to federal legislation, employer expectations, and institutional accountability. These factors collectively position financial literacy as an indispensable curricular and co-curricular priority within our Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). This session invites participants to collaboratively examine and discuss the 2024 Financial Value Transparency and Gainful Employment regulations, Debt-to-Earnings reporting requirements, and institutional accountability for career outcomes. Participants are encouraged to reflect on and share practices where faculty and career services professionals on campuses can partner to strategically leverage financial literacy programming, therefore strengthening student retention and career preparedness.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
10:15–11:15 a.m.

Coffee Talk

Providence Hall

From Pilot to Practice: Using Data to Scale an Evidence-Based Bridge Week Model for First-Year Success

Julia Van Steenberghe, University of Maine
T. Scott Marzilli, University of Maine
Laura Millay, University of Maine
Jason Harkins, University of Maine
Heather S. Pixley, University of Maine
McFrederick Obiri-Tetteh, University of Maine
Sarah Johnson, University of Maine
Debra Allen, University of Maine

Abstract: Over the past five years, the University of Maine has implemented and scaled a Bridge Week model grounded in evidence-based practices to support first-year student success. Initially embedded within small, discipline-specific Research Learning Experiences (RLEs) in programs such as forestry and biology, Bridge Week began as an opt-in research experience designed to foster early academic engagement and peer connection. As assessment data demonstrated gains in students' sense of belonging, sense of connection, and first-year persistence, the model expanded to larger programs including nursing, education, and business. Today, nearly half of incoming students participate in a required Bridge Week experience. In Fall 2026, the institution will launch a fully scaled, university-wide "Black Bear Bridge," offering all incoming students a full week of pre-semester programming. This session will explore the evolution from small pilot programs to institutional-scale implementation, highlighting key data insights, design principles, and cross-campus collaboration strategies. Attendees will gain practical approaches for leveraging evidence to expand student success initiatives and reimagine orientation as a high-impact, extended transition experience.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
10:15–11:15 a.m.

Coffee Talk

Merrimac

Strategic Outreach at Scale: How to Personalize Support for Unique Student Groups

Jamie Hall, Utah Valley University
Jenny Le Starge, Utah Valley University

Abstract: Utah Valley University is an open enrollment institution that has a wide range of students our center supports. Our staff is charged to reach out to all 40,000+ students to: offer support, help them navigate campus, and eliminate barriers that may be hindering their success. Learn how we lead out on this initiative by coordinating our efforts and engaging with our students through intentional campaigns to help them on their academic journey.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Monticello

Connection & Community: Proactive Transfer Student Support

Jacoby Subko, University of South Florida
Alana Perry, University of South Florida

Abstract: The purpose of this session is to learn how collaboration between community colleges and universities ensures a seamless transition for transfer students from enrollment through graduation. Specifically, best practices on how university personnel can provide resources and opportunities for community college transfer students while at the two-year institution. Techniques to support transfer students can combat common barriers for transfer students such as matriculation and social integration. Strategies, outcomes, and resources to support the transfer student population will be discussed. Administrators and advisors at both the community college and university level are encouraged to attend.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Tutorial I

Merrimac

Sense of Purpose: The Overlooked Superpower of Student Success

Michelle Eaton, University of North Georgia
Meredith Higgins, University of North Georgia

Abstract: Colleges and universities have long centered student success initiatives on three core areas: well-being, belonging and engagement, and academic achievement. However, one's sense of purpose, which is consistently shown to influence student outcomes, remains largely absent from most structural frameworks. The Cigna Report (2026), examining the vitality of Americans in 2025, found that individuals with a strong sense of purpose demonstrate better health outcomes, deeper social connections, and higher levels of engagement in both academic and professional settings. Recognizing this critical but overlooked dimension, the University of North Georgia (UNG) has adopted a comprehensive model known as the Four Pillars of Student Success which comprises Academic Achievement, Well-Being, Belonging & Engagement, and Purpose. Referencing Strayhorn's work highlighting higher education's shifting role from "gatekeepers of information" to "guides on the side," this framework positions purpose as essential for helping students navigate an information-rich world. This session will share UNG's approach to integrating purpose into student success structures, the research supporting this shift, and practical strategies for helping students walk towards discovering their purpose to enhance engagement, persistence, and long-term well-being.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Paper

Poplar Hall

Supporting Student-Parents and Caregivers: A 2-Generation Model Approach for Student Success and Institutional Change

Allison Garefino, Kennesaw State University

Jennifer A. Wade-Berg, California State University, Long Beach

Kasey McComas, Kennesaw State University

Abstract: College students who are parents or caregivers navigate intersecting roles and compounded responsibilities that distinguish their educational experiences from those of traditional students. These students often face role strain, time poverty, financial stress, and institutional and systemic inflexibility—factors that impede persistence, retention, and degree completion. This paper presents a conceptual framework grounded in the 2-Generation (2Gen) approach to support the retention and long-term success of student-parents and caregivers by addressing the needs of both students and their families. Drawing on evidence-based best practices, including the Ascend 2Gen framework and comparable institutional and community-based models, this work examines strategies at the family, community, institutional, and structural levels, as well as the limitations and barriers in existing programs. This framework is illustrated through the Kennesaw State University Children and Family Program, a research-informed initiative designed to enhance student success while reinforcing caregiving roles. Key components include an ambassador program, a student-parent toolkit, behavioral parent training, and academic, social, and informational support, with particular attention to first-generation student-parents and caregivers. This paper highlights implications for program development, institutional policy, and future research to promote sustainable retention and long-term student success.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Providence Hall

Transformational Programs Series for Online Students

Chavon Freeman, Regent University

Abstract: Transformational program series are designed to provide holistic support and build a sense of community for online students from a group coaching framework. Instead of one workshop or one topic, this approach designs 4-6 weeks of topics under a theme that covers multiple topics that are beneficial for the growth, understanding, and development of students. The program series is designed as one-hour sessions using the group coaching framework: an eight-to-fifteen-minute presentation, one whole group activity, breakout sessions, and whole group share and wrap-up. The program series allows the online population to be equipped for success as students and feel connected to the campus community. The program series approach creates an opportunity for commitment to a series of lessons by the students that are designed for the overall benefit of the success of the students. The program series is tailored to help students navigate different dynamics of their student experience. It has also been received well by online students at all levels: Undergraduate and Graduate level students. We have seen more graduate-level participation in the online program series.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
2:30–3:30 p.m.

Tutorial I

Poplar Hall

Connecting the Compass: A Holistic, Wrap-Around Advising Model for First-Year Success

Jonie Threatt, University of Alabama

Preston Thomas, University of Alabama

Abstract: Supporting first-year students requires more than just one-on-one meetings and course recommendations. This session presents a comprehensive, wrap-around advising model designed to proactively support students through a coordinated network of student-centered success strategies, peer engagement, and integrated academic resources. Grounded in high-touch communication and relationship-based advising, our model centers student belonging, empowerment, and academic persistence. Participants will leave with replicable strategies for launching a multi-layered approach to student success.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
2:30–3:30 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Providence Hall

From Pilot to Impact: Collaborative, Data-Driven Evaluation of Student Success Initiatives

Laura Millay, University of Maine

T. Scott Marzilli, University of Maine

Afua Kwarteng, University of Maine

Paul Dexter, University of Southern Maine

Julia Van Steenberghe, University of Maine

Heather S. Pixley, University of Maine

Sarah Johnson, University of Maine

McFrederick Obiri-Tetteh, University of Maine

Debra Allen, University of Maine

Abstract: This session arises from a partnership between institutional research and campus leaders to evaluate innovative pilot projects designed to improve outcomes in high-enrollment introductory courses. In fall 2025, 24 projects implemented research-based interventions supporting courses enrolling more than 9,000 students across Maine's seven public university campuses. Projects were supported by UMS TRANSFORMS, a systemwide initiative funded by the Harold Alfond Foundation. Courses were eligible based on having 3% or more of first- and second-year students earning a D/F/withdraw in the course in at least one of the prior three fall terms. We used campus-specific Power BI dashboards to track changes across 100+ courses and facilitate project-level comparisons. We shared those descriptive dashboards with project teams to support iteration and inform Fall 2026 proposals. Statistical analyses were then used to estimate effects ranging from 0% to 6% improvements in student outcomes, with the strongest projects encouraged to pursue continuation and scale-up in the next funding cycle. In this session we will discuss partnerships between institutional research and campus leaders to support evidence-based program development. Methods include statistical analysis and binary logistic regression to assess associations in observational studies, Microsoft Power BI dashboards to communicate preliminary findings, and strategic communication.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
2:30–3:30 p.m.

Paper

Monticello

Strategic Enrollment Management as a Key Retention Framework

Sara Kelly, SUNY Brockport

Abstract: Student retention and persistence are integral components of a strategic enrollment management (SEM) framework. This paper discusses the key concepts, foundational research, and practical examples of establishing a strategic enrollment management model that bridges student recruitment and retention efforts. Using an example from a mid-sized public university that experienced 23% enrollment growth in the past three years, this paper provides a concrete example of a SEM framework that prioritizes cross-divisional engagement. Student retention starts with how institutions recruit, onboard and assist students in their transition to our colleges and universities.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
2:30–3:30 p.m.

Paper

Stratford Hall

The Two-Year Covid-19 Gap: Does it Matter Where it Landed in a Student's K-12 Sequence?

Michael Morsches, Moraine Valley Community College

Grant Matthews, Lane Community College

Blaise Denton, Moraine Valley Community College

Kipp Cozad, Moraine Valley Community College

Karrie Bieker, Moraine Valley Community College

Daniel Gaichas, Moraine Valley Community College

Abstract: Like many other similar institutions, Moraine Valley Community College has seen enrollment fluctuation, particularly in developmental education courses. In recent years, higher ratios of students need developmental coursework. We attribute at least part of this shift to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated remote-learning school policies. This decline led us to the question, “Does it matter what grade the students were in when the pandemic occurred?” In other words, was the “gap” in schooling caused by the COVID-19 pandemic different depending on if it fell in a student's middle or high school career? To test the hypothesis that the COVID-19 Gap was more detrimental at some stages of student development than others, we have designed a longitudinal study to measure the college preparedness of incoming first-year students based on their placement scores in reading, writing, and math. We compare those students who went through the gap while they were in secondary school—during their senior, junior, sophomore, freshman, eighth, and seventh grade year. Subsequently, we will continue to track incoming first-year students back through their pre-school education over the next eight years. This paper will address the design of our study, as well as additional mitigating factors that also affected college placement in Illinois.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
3:45–4:45 p.m.

Paper

Merrimac

First-Semester Registration Timing as an Early Predictor of Student Retention

Joy Carr, West Virginia University

Matthew Matyasovsky, West Virginia University

Miriam Leary, West Virginia University

Abstract: Predicting first-time, full-time freshmen (FTFTF) at risk of attrition is critical for early identification and targeted intervention. While academic and demographic indicators are commonly used, early behavioral indicators such as course registration timing remain underexplored. This study evaluated first-semester course registration timing as a predictor of student retention among 2022–2024 FTFTF cohorts. Multivariable logistic regression was used for controlling academic, financial, and socio-demographic characteristics. Students were grouped by registration timing: on or before May 1, May 2 - June 1, June 2 – July 1, and after July 1. Retention rates declined across groups (87%, 82%, 79%, and 65%, respectively), with lower retention among students registering after July 1 ($p < 0.05$). Compared to earlier registrants, students registering after July 1 had lower ACT scores (20.9 vs 23.6), SAT scores (1053.4 vs 1137.4), and high school GPAs (3.33 vs 3.77) (all $p < 0.0001$), and were more likely to be first-generation (35.2% vs 19.5%) and Pell-eligible (34.5% vs 19.2%), (all $p < 0.0001$). These findings suggest that registration timing functions as a simple, early behavioral marker of student risk, capturing both academic preparedness and structural barriers. Institutions may leverage this indicator to implement proactive outreach and support strategies prior to starting college to improve retention outcomes.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
3:45–4:45 p.m.

Presentation

Poplar Hall

From Data to Discourse: Benefits of the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) and Publishing in the Sourcebook

Heather Kelly, University of Delaware

Sarah Kyte, University of Arizona

Abstract: Ready to elevate or showcase your student retention efforts? Join us in Poplar Hall to meet with Heather Kelly and Sarah Kyte, the editors of Building Bridges for Student Success: A Sourcebook for Colleges and Universities. In this session, you will discover the powerful community and data resources of the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE), as well as how to successfully translate your campus data and retention initiatives into manuscripts, navigate the peer-review process, and publish in the CSRDE Sourcebook. Whether you are looking to benchmark against peer institutions, share your campus retention success stories, or expand your professional footprint, this session offers the practical tools and connections you need. We hope to see you there!

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
3:45–4:45 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Monticello

Student Perceptions of Components in an Academic Skills Course

Patrick Perry, University of Mississippi
Anna Blakely, University of Mississippi
Kyle Ellis, University of Mississippi

Abstract: This facilitated discussion is focused on better understanding the perceived importance of components in a class designed to support students who have fallen below good standing academically at The University of Mississippi. The panelists will discuss EDHE 202 – Fundamentals of Active Learning, a course taught to students at The University of Mississippi who have fallen below a 2.00 grade point average. We will also discuss results of a survey administered in late spring 2026, to students who have taken EDHE 202 in the past academic year. The purpose of the survey is to gauge student perceptions of skills they need to be successful in college. Currently, the course content is composed of topics such as time management, planning, study techniques, test-taking strategies, writing skills, and reading skills. The survey given to students will ask for their perceptions of the importance (Likert scale and open response) of the skills mentioned above, as well as non-covered areas in the course such as emotional intelligence, growth mindset, mental wellness, and community engagement. During this session, we will discuss research findings in the student success literature and engage in dialogue about what session attendees have noticed at their institutions related to student success.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
3:45–4:45 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Stratford Hall

The Power of Presence: Building a Culture of Faculty Participation in First-Year Retention

Kellie Schmidt, Franklin College
Sarah Summers, Franklin College

Abstract: While faculty engagement is vital to student persistence, it can be difficult to ensure consistent and widespread faculty participation in retention events. This facilitated discussion explores how our small liberal arts institution reimagined the administrative task of major declaration into an opportunity for faculty to engage in first-year retention. By reframing the major declaration process as Exploration and Declaration Day, a high-energy, community-based celebration, faculty participation grew from 5 to 27 over four years, while student attendance more than doubled to include 88% of the first-year class. Participants in this Facilitated Discussion will explore how making retention work visible, communal, and fun can significantly increase faculty buy-in across campus. The facilitators will share the specific strategies used to scale the event, including low-cost departmental incentives and the use of social media, and discuss how the event builds community around academic interest. Participants will discuss ways to leverage campus milestones at their own institutions to foster a deeper sense of belonging for both faculty and students. Join this session to learn how a small budget, some intentional reframing, and a lot of confetti can turn checking a box into a campus retention ritual that celebrates faculty-student connection.

Tuesday, 10/20/2026
3:45–4:45 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Providence Hall

Using Student Feedback and Data to Increase First-Year Retention

Brittany Artz, Boise State University
Carissa Wilcox, Boise State University

Abstract: Retention of first-year students is consistently on the mind of student-focused professionals across higher education. Bronco BASE Camp is a first five-week, one credit course available to first semester freshmen at Boise State University as an initiative to improve retention for first year students. Over the last five years, the course has continually evolved based on student feedback, instructor reflection, and quantitative data. When compared to their peers, students who have taken BASE Camp are more likely to be retained. In this session, we will share our experiences and facilitate discussions about programming for first-year students that focuses on student feedback and quantitative data.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026
8:30–10:00 a.m.

Poplar/Providence/Stratford Hall

Keynote Address: The Signals Were Always There: Moving From Data-Rich to Action-Ready

Andrea Neal-Smith, Ed.D., A+ Grant Writing & Consulting, LLC

Abstract: Higher education has never known more about the factors that shape student persistence, belonging, and success. Yet students still encounter institutions where vital information remains fragmented across offices, early alerts become unowned referrals, and evidence arrives without the authority, capacity, or coordination required to act. Drawing on more than two decades of institutional leadership and the scholarship of retention, engagement, belonging, and thriving, Dr. Andrea Neal-Smith examines the gap between what colleges know and what they are prepared to do. She introduces institutional responsiveness as the missing bridge between evidence and student thriving, the capacity to recognize changing conditions, connect fragmented knowledge, assign responsibility and authority, and act while meaningful options remain open. Through national data, practitioner cases, and a deeply personal story of educational possibility, she challenges leaders to move beyond visibility toward responsibility—and to recognize that the signals institutions receive reveal not only risk and disruption, but also aspiration, talent, and possibility.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026
10:15–11:15 a.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Merrimac

Building IR/IE Internship Programs: A Practical Discussion on Design, Capacity, and Impact

Stephanie Whittlesey, Cal Poly Humboldt

Abstract: Given the growing pressure on colleges and universities to demonstrate the value of higher education, investment in on-campus internship programs is one strategy to support strong post-graduation employment outcomes. Institutional Research/Effectiveness (IR/IE), and Assessment offices are especially well-positioned to contribute to this work, as they can provide hands-on experience with data analysis, survey research, and data-informed collaboration. This facilitated discussion focuses on practical approaches to hosting interns in IR/IE and Assessment offices. We'll begin with a brief example of an internship program developed within the IR office at Cal Poly Humboldt. In their program, student interns are paid, trained in BI tools such as Tableau, and contribute to real projects aligned with campus needs. The program has existed in different forms for over 15 years and has supported career pathways in higher education research, including former interns who now hold full-time IR roles. Participants will explore internship program development together, focusing on what is realistic given their funding and capacity constraints. The discussion will emphasize what makes an internship meaningful for students while remaining sustainable for IR staff. Participants will leave with ideas and practical take-home materials from Cal Poly Humboldt's program.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026
10:15–11:15 a.m.

Presentation

Poplar Hall

Continued Conversation With Andrea Neal-Smith, Ed.D.

Abstract: This concurrent session is available for participants who would like to continue the conversation with Dr. Neal-Smith.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026
10:15–11:15 a.m.

Tutorial I

Monticello

Filling in the Blank: Building a Culture of Scholarship With Data Storytelling

Lindsay Peck, Rutgers University-Camden
Laura Collins, Rutgers University-Camden

Abstract: Departmental efforts to impact success must be rooted in established student needs; but for all the programmatic initiatives that exist (in the literature, through best practices, and propagated through institutional traditions), how do we know where to invest our time and energy? Rutgers-Camden's Division of Student Academic Success (SAS) used a simple tool to reframe departments' imperatives to guide their work—working backwards from outcomes storytelling to spur the search for associated evidence. This session will help attendees articulate the story of their students, reflect on departmental influence related to that story, and then align efforts to maximize impact on success.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026
10:15–11:15 a.m.

Paper

Stratford Hall

The Missing Middle: Supporting Second-to-Third-Year Retention to Drive Graduation Success

Sarah Marshall, University of South Florida
Kim Williams, University of South Florida

Abstract: The Office of Academic Advocacy (OAA) at the University of South Florida implements a holistic, data-informed approach to improve retention and graduation outcomes. By integrating over 20 data insights into a centralized Power BI platform, the OAA enables proactive interventions that address systemic barriers and support student belonging, major alignment, and academic progress. This model expands the definition of retention beyond the first year, emphasizing the critical second-to-third-year transition, where institutions often lose a significant portion of students. Through targeted tools such as retention trackers, major change resources, and intervention groups, academic advocates identify and support at-risk students during this pivotal period. These efforts have contributed to measurable improvements, including a more than seven percent increase in four-year graduation rates and over a three percent rise in six-year graduation rates. The academic advocacy framework demonstrates how strategic, equity-focused, and data-driven practices can strengthen persistence across the student lifecycle and enhance institutional outcomes.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026
11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Merrimac

Academic Advising as Retention Strategy: Governance, Innovation, and Assessment

Brian Ingoldsby, University of Toronto Mississauga
Scott Clarke, University of Toronto Mississauga

Abstract: Academic advising is widely understood as important to student success, but institutions vary significantly in how advising is structured, governed, innovated, and assessed. This facilitated discussion will invite participants to explore how advising can be strengthened as a coordinated institutional strategy for retention and progression, rather than understood primarily as a set of individual student appointments or services. The session will begin with a brief example from the University of Toronto Mississauga's recent work to strengthen academic advising, offered not as a preferred model but as a conversation starter to surface transferable questions about accountability, coordination, experimentation, and evidence. Participants will then self-select into one of two discussion domains: Organizational Structures and Governance or Innovation and Assessment. Small groups will consider what has worked on their campuses, what challenges remain, what risks and trade-offs leaders should anticipate, and what practical recommendations may be useful across institutional contexts. The session will emphasize peer learning, cross-institutional comparison, and practical takeaways. Participants will leave with ideas for strengthening advising governance, identifying and assessing promising advising innovations, and positioning advising more deliberately as part of institutional retention strategy.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Monticello

Creating a Cohort-Based Support Model for Quantitative Online Courses

Michelle Wiley, Penn State World Campus

Megan Fung, Penn State World Campus

Abstract: To support student success in an online introductory statistics course, STAT 200, Penn State World Campus has piloted a cohort-based, facilitator-led supplemental course over two semesters. Students have historically struggled to complete STAT 200 at World Campus, which is a key requirement for many majors, and the struggle to pass STAT 200 created a barrier for retention and persistence towards degree completion for World Campus students. Statistics faculty and academic support experts collaborated to create a course that addresses the most pressing student barriers for student success in STAT 200: time management, statistics anxiety, and cognitive overload.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Paper

Poplar Hall

Leveraging Challenging Legislation to Improve Retention Rates of Our Most At-Risk Students

Yolanda Bennett, Moraine Valley Community College

Rafif Abuzaghleh, Moraine Valley Community College

Christian Torres Smolenets, Moraine Valley Community College

Lauren Zajac, Moraine Valley Community College

Michael Morsches, Moraine Valley Community College

Abstract: Over the past several years, community colleges in Illinois have been compelled to change their admission standards and to reduce the amount of developmental coursework that colleges can require for incoming students. Students can now benefit from “Multiple Measures,” where they can bypass placement testing based on their ACT or SAT scores, their cumulative H.S. G.P.A.s, or a H.S. transitional course. In addition, students can only be required to take one traditional developmental course with the addition of a subsequent co-requisite course. This has resulted in a lower-skilled group of students enduring an accelerated, more advanced developmental education sequence. In accepting this challenge to promote less-skilled students through more compressed and difficult curricula, we have also gained the agency to deal with a decade-old problem of serving students in an open admissions college who were not prepared for our lowest levels of coursework. Borrowing from the Ability to Benefit concept, we created a pre-developmental Foundations program that students can take free of charge before they enter developmental coursework. These students are below sixth grade proficiency in language arts and mathematics. This paper will address the creation of our Foundations program, our triaging process, and the positive results we have witnessed.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026
11:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Providence Hall

When Families Are in the Loop, Students Stay Enrolled: Rethinking Family Engagement as a Retention Strategy

Sherri Erkel, CampusESP

Meredith Higgins, University of North Georgia

Abstract: Student retention is one of the most pressing challenges in higher education—and one of the most overlooked levers may be sitting right outside the classroom. New research from CampusESP analyzed 20,566 first-time, first-year students across nine colleges and universities and found that students whose families had access to student progress data had retention rates 6.9 percentage points higher than those without. For Black and Hispanic students, that gap widened to 9.6 points. For first-generation students, 7.2 points. This facilitated discussion brings together CampusESP and University of North Georgia to share what this research reveals about family engagement as a retention strategy, and to dig into what it actually takes to implement it well. Attendees will hear how UNG has embedded family engagement into their student success strategy, then engage in structured discussion around practical realities: navigating FERPA, getting campus-wide buy-in, balancing student autonomy with family access, and building sustainable processes that scale. Whether you're just starting to think about family engagement or looking to strengthen what you already have, this session offers both evidence and honest peer conversation.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026
2:30–3:30 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Merrimac

How to College: Addressing College Readiness and Preparedness

Natalie Morrow, University of North Alabama

Erin Wittscheck, University of North Alabama

Abstract: The transition from high school to college is a complicated one, and many students today are ill-prepared for the changes they will inevitably face through that transition. Often these issues can affect a student's success in college and contribute to a rocky start on the pathway to completing their degree. Due to the lack of preparedness many institutions are seeing in their first-year populations, our solution is the How to College event and series. This discussion will be centered around the design and implementation of programming offered by Advisors to address these concerns and increase student preparedness, readiness, and connection to campus. The goal is to address student preparedness in an accessible and personable way, driving early connections to campus resources and encouraging confidence development before an incoming student's first day of class.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

2:30–3:30 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Stratford Hall

Retention Grant for Financial Aid Suspended Students

Esther Pla-Cazares, College of Southern Nevada

Amy Palmer, College of Southern Nevada

Abstract: This session highlights the implementation and impact of the College of Southern Nevada's (CSN) Retention Grant, a targeted intervention designed to support students who have lost financial aid eligibility due to Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) suspension. Many of these students demonstrate strong academic potential but face financial barriers that prevent continued enrollment. The Retention Grant provides a one-time opportunity for students to re-engage in their academic journey by covering up to six credits, paired with structured, counselor-led support. Participants will explore how Academic Counselors play a central role in identifying eligible students, guiding them through the application process, and providing ongoing support through monthly meetings, academic progress tracking, and targeted referrals to campus resources. The session will outline key components of the program, including eligibility criteria, implementation strategies, and accountability measures that promote student persistence. Interactive elements will include case scenarios and guided discussion on how institutions can replicate or adapt similar interventions. Attendees will leave with practical strategies for supporting students facing financial and academic barriers and designing retention initiatives that combine financial support with intentional advising.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

2:30–3:30 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Monticello

The Connected Campus: A Blueprint for Student Success

Karen Cassidy, University of North Carolina Wilmington

Tanya Stack, University of North Carolina Wilmington

Tamara Cooper, University of North Carolina Wilmington

DiAnna Washington, University of North Carolina Wilmington

Abstract: University of North Carolina Wilmington's Student Success & Retention (SSR) team has developed a cross divisional partnership model that operationalizes the Putting Students First framework to strengthen student connection, persistence, and completion. This session highlights how SSR integrates the university's four dimensions of student success—academic achievement, career preparedness, engagement, and holistic wellbeing—into a unified, campuswide retention strategy. Participants will explore the full ecosystem of student success: designing data informed early alert systems that students trust, removing administrative barriers through evidence-based policy advocacy, and building intentional outreach campaigns.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

2:30–3:30 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Providence Hall

From Vague to Focused: Transforming Retention Through Holistic Advising and Data-Driven Leadership

John Harrelson, University of Dayton

Justin Keen, University of Dayton

Meghan Henning, University of Dayton

Lee Dixon, University of Dayton

Abstract: When student retention is vaguely framed as "everyone's responsibility," it often becomes no one's. Recognizing this institutional pitfall, the University of Dayton (UD) transformed its strategy through two major structural changes: implementing a university-wide Holistic Academic Advising (HAA) model and creating a small, data-driven retention leadership team. Previously, UD relied on a diffuse, mostly faculty-led "academic" advising model and an oversized student success committee, which led to inconsistent student support and stalled campus projects. To address growing student needs, UD shifted to professional HAAs who now serve as "team captains" for each student's customized, holistic, cross-divisional support network (their "Flight Crew"). Simultaneously, a newly streamlined retention team was formed to execute targeted, data-informed initiatives. Even with an existing 90% retention rate, this agile structure enabled UD to advance critical projects for incremental gains, including high-DFW course interventions, B Term pilots, and HAA-delivered First-Year Introduction courses. This session will explore the change management strategies used to overhaul UD's advising model. Attendees will learn how pairing professional advising with focused, data-driven leadership can clear the pathway for targeted student success, and will have the opportunity to tailor these best practices to their own institutional challenges.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

3:45–4:45 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Poplar Hall

From Access to Achievement: Accessibility Services as a Student Success Strategy

Robin Dewey, McDaniel College

Christine Moran, McDaniel College

Melanie Conley, McDaniel College

Abstract: Many institutional retention strategies emphasize broad, campus-wide initiatives; however, targeted support for special populations can yield stronger persistence and completion outcomes. This session highlights McDaniel College's Student Accessibility and Support Services (SASS) as a data-informed, equity-centered model for improving retention and graduation rates among students with documented disabilities and diverse learning needs. SASS employs a holistic framework that extends beyond traditional accommodations to include individualized academic coaching, executive functioning support, coordinated mental health resources, and proactive transition programming. This integrated approach fosters self-advocacy, academic confidence, sustained engagement, and a sense of belonging, key drivers of student persistence. Institutional data demonstrate that students registered with SASS are retained and graduate at rates exceeding those of the overall student population. These findings challenge deficit-based narratives and position accessibility services as a viable retention strategy rather than solely a compliance function. This session will share outcome data, key program components, and implementation strategies adaptable across institutional types. Through a facilitated discussion, participants will gain practical insights into building scalable, student-centered support systems that advance equity, improve persistence for students with varying abilities and learning preferences while advancing institutional retention goals.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

3:45–4:45 p.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Monticello

From Exploration to Retention: Helping Students Find Purpose Through Major and Career Exploration

Danae Romrell, Brigham Young University-Idaho

Melissa Russell, Brigham Young University-Idaho

Travis Smith, Brigham Young University-Idaho

Hector Becerril-Garcia, Brigham Young University-Idaho

Abstract: Major and career exploration is often framed as an individual decision-making task, yet it plays an important role in helping students develop a sense of identity and purpose that strengthens their commitment to persist. This facilitated discussion explores how institutions can better support students in connecting academic choices to meaningful personal futures. After a brief review of principles and best practices in career and major exploration, most of the session will be an interactive discussion. Attendees will engage in small- and large-group discussions around key questions: What does effective institutional support for career and major exploration look like in practice? How should institutions sequence career exploration across the student lifecycle? What institutional strategies help students move from uncertainty to direction? What barriers limit engagement in exploration, and how can institutions address them? How do institutional core values help career exploration and retention at the individual student level? Participants will share experiences, compare approaches, and generate practical ideas that can be adapted across institutional contexts. The session will conclude with a synthesis of key themes and actionable strategies.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

3:45–4:45 p.m.

Paper

Merrimac

Turning Research Into Action: A Systems Change Approach to Advancing Retention Efforts Through an Applied Research Lab

Jennifer Rodriguez, Stony Brook University

Robert Drago, Stony Brook University

Michelle Setnikar, Stony Brook University

Tiana De Jesus, Stony Brook University

Abstract: Developing and scaling effective retention strategies requires a commitment to data-informed and evidence-based practices. This paper introduces the Student Success Through Applied Research (SSTAR) Lab, an action-oriented team at Stony Brook University dedicated to advancing undergraduate success and retention through scholarly inquiry and data-informed practices. Unlike traditional student support units, the SSTAR Lab redefines the role of retention advisors as scholarly practitioners to advance student success efforts. We will share the story of the lab's founding and evolution as an innovative research hub designed to investigate critical issues in student success through a practitioner's lens. The paper outlines how we leverage institutional data, engage in action-oriented research, and develop evidence-based initiatives to drive measurable improvements in undergraduate retention and graduation rates. We also explore how the SSTAR Lab utilizes a systems change approach to identify key stakeholders for collaboration, promote a research-informed culture, and initiate campus-wide change. Colleagues will learn how a dedicated student success lab can strengthen the institution's ability to respond to shifting student needs, close equity gaps, and increase retention through practitioner-led, research-driven action.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

4:45–5:45 p.m.

Poster

Grande Promenade

Beyond the Alert: Automated Outreach and Human Follow Through in Student Success

T. Scott Marzilli, University of Maine

James Huff, University of Maine

Laura Millay, University of Maine

Julia Van Steenberghe, University of Maine

Simona Mitevska, University of Maine

Heather S. Pixley, University of Maine

Sarah Johnson, University of Maine

McFrederick Obiri-Tetteh, University of Maine

Debra Allen, University of Maine

Abstract: Black Bear Early Alerts at the University of Maine have become a fundamental part of the university's student success infrastructure, moving beyond identification to outreach and follow-through. Over three years, faculty participation increased from under 30% to over 80%, strengthening UMaine's ability to recognize need. In Fall 2025, 564 first-year students received at least one alert, generating 1,900 documented follow-up comments. This infrastructure has supported record retention and has been especially important for students facing the greatest barriers. In Fall 2025, nearly 70% of students with early alert cases had one or more barriers to success, showing the system reaches students most likely to benefit from support. It also revealed a persistent challenge: approximately 20% of closed cases ended because the student could not be contacted. In response, UMaine launched Black Bear Check-In, an automated 21-day communication campaign triggered only after a case is closed as "Unable to Contact Student". This approach extends care without requiring advising teams to repeat unsuccessful outreach, allowing them to reengage once the automated check-in prompts a student response. Nearly 200 students to date have participated in this outreach; more than 50 of these students have initiated contact and received timely, coordinated human-centered support.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

4:45–5:45 p.m.

Poster

Grande Promenade

Cascading Empowerment in Gateway STEM Courses: Implications for Student Success

Heather S. Pixley, University of Maine

Laura Gurney, University of Maine

Laura Millay, University of Maine

Julia Van Steenberghe, University of Maine

Sarah Johnson, University of Maine

McFrederick Obiri-Tetteh, University of Maine

Rachelle Maietta, University of Maine

Debra Allen, University of Maine

T. Scott Marzilli, University of Maine

Abstract: The first year in STEM majors is a critical period for academic success, sense of belonging, and persistence, yet many students continue to struggle in high-enrollment gateway courses. This qualitative, exploratory case study is a cross-department collaboration between the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) and the School of Computing and Information Sciences (SCIS), funded by the Harold Alfond Foundation through the Gateways to Success (GTS) Initiative at the University of Maine. We examine an empowerment-based peer leadership model in which an SCIS Faculty Mentor adopts a transformational and distributed leadership approach, intentionally fostering peer leader autonomy, shared decision-making, and mutual support within a strongly supportive culture that prioritizes student success through regular academic support sessions and targeted social events. Data sources include a demographic survey and semi-structured focus group with three undergraduate GTS Peer Leaders and an in-depth Faculty Mentor interview, analyzed using a structured codebook and qualitative analysis software (Dedoose). Initial findings indicate a “cascading empowerment” structure in which departmental support enables the Faculty Mentor’s trust- and empowerment-centered approach, in turn fostering strong leadership identities within the Peer Leaders who promote student engagement, draw repeat support visits, and cultivate a greater sense of belonging in SCIS.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

4:45–5:45 p.m.

Poster

Grande Promenade

Developing Support Groups to Enhance Retention and Success of Transfer Students

Kuo Chun-Fang, University of Hawaii at Hilo

Iris Lechowicz, University of Hawaii at Hilo

Abstract: Transfer students face numerous transitional challenges, such as transfer shock, adjustment issues, academic performance, and financial stress. These stressors can affect transfer students' success. In order to enhance transfer students' adjustment and academic/career readiness, it is critical for universities to implement innovative programs that support their individual needs. The transfer students support group can address these transfer students' social-emotional needs and educate them effective ways for academic or career preparation. By integrating the psychoeducational component into the group process, counselors can motivate transfer students to engage in the group and facilitate their personal and professional growth. This poster addresses University of Hawaii at Hilo's (UHH) partnership and cooperation among their First Year Experience (FYE), New Student Orientation (NSO), and Counseling Services. This poster aims to address the adjustment concerns of transfer students and discuss innovative ways to develop transfer students support groups at college counseling center. Specifically, the presenter will present an overview of the transfer students support group offered by the UHH Counseling Services. The presenter will describe the objectives and procedures of the group as well as the outcome of the support group. Participants will learn how to form a support group that considers the unique needs of transfer students.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

4:45–5:45 p.m.

Poster

Grande Promenade

Does Proactive Advising Improve Retention? Evidence From Two First-Year Advising Pilots

Brian Ingoldsby, University of Toronto Mississauga

Scott Clarke, University of Toronto Mississauga

Abstract: Proactive, holistic academic advising is widely viewed as a promising strategy for improving student retention, yet institutions often lack rigorous evidence about its impact or clarity on which advising interventions warrant investment. This poster will present the design, implementation, and results of two RCT-style advising pilots conducted at the University of Toronto Mississauga to assess whether more proactive, assigned advising improves first-year student success and retention. The first pilot randomly assigned 1,008 first-year students with lower first-term sessional GPAs to standard advising support, standard support plus proactive email outreach, or proactive, holistic advising that included access to a dedicated academic advisor. Compared with the control group, students in the proactive, holistic advising cohort demonstrated a six percentage-point increase in retention to Year 2 and a reduction in academic suspension. The second pilot randomly assigned 985 incoming first-year students with lower admission averages to traditional advising or proactive, holistic advising beginning before course registration. Early results showed a statistically significant 5 percentage-point reduction in summer melt, with Year 2 retention and academic outcomes forthcoming. The poster will highlight pilot design, outcomes, subgroup analysis, implementation considerations, and implications for evidence-informed advising investments.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

4:45–5:45 p.m.

Poster

Grande Promenade

Flipping the Script: Engaging Students in the Business of Retention

Tiana De Jesus, Stony Brook University

Abstract: To promote degree progress and academic success, the Undergraduate Retention Initiatives team at Stony Brook developed an innovative internship model to engage students in our retention work. We recruited from two distinct groups: lower-classmen for early engagement in high-impact practices and graduating seniors short on credits to complete their degrees. Eligibility required only a 2.0 GPA, expanding access to experiential learning opportunities for some students otherwise considered “at-risk” and ineligible for other high-impact opportunities. The internship goal was to enhance existing efforts to promote academic success by leveraging students’ voices and expertise in retention initiatives. Interns researched and learned about higher education topics, student development theories, retention strategies, and academic success initiatives. Interns audited departmental communications and initiatives to ensure they were student-ready and addressed prevalent retention barriers. The culminating project was to propose an intervention addressing a retention challenge encountered during their academic journey. The initiative achieved a 100% persistence rate for underclassmen and a 100% graduation rate for "near completion" seniors, demonstrating a successful, low-cost strategy for degree progress while gathering data on retention barriers. This poster will illustrate the impacts of experiential opportunities on retention and include recommendations for how other institutions can develop similar initiatives.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

4:45–5:45 p.m.

Poster

Grande Promenade

How to College: A Multi-faceted Approach to Student Readiness and Preparedness

Natalie Morrow, University of North Alabama

Erin Wittscheck, University of North Alabama

Abstract: First-year students experience a complex transition from high school to college, often exacerbated by a lack of preparation in key areas of student preparedness and readiness. This lack of preparedness can affect a student’s success in college and cause potential issues for the student during a time of transition. Due to this lack of preparedness and readiness, our solution is a multi-faceted approach to first-year academic retention through a program called How To College. This program includes an annual event, guided workshops throughout each major semester, podcasts to supplement instructional goals, and a dedicated website housing easily accessible support material. The goal of these programmatic components is to address student preparedness in an approachable and interactive way, encouraging an incoming student’s early connection to campus resources and helping to develop their confidence before the first day of class.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

4:45–5:45 p.m.

Poster

Grande Promenade

New Student Survey: Listening Early. Responding Fast.

Karen Cassidy, University of North Carolina Wilmington

DiAnna Washington, University of North Carolina Wilmington

Abstract: University of North Carolina Wilmington's Student Success & Retention (SSR) team implemented a new early-term student survey to identify and address barriers to persistence within the first four weeks of the semester. Delivered through autogenerated, personalized messages, the survey engages newly enrolled first-year students in real time and achieved an increase in response rate compared to previous outreach efforts. Students report needs across financial stress, belonging and loneliness, academic concerns, health, and other early retention indicators. The survey also captures students' identities and lived experiences, enabling SSR to connect students with relevant supports and tailor outreach using cross-tabulated data patterns. Responses are integrated with existing datasets, including Wavelength, Starfish, and Orientation Survey results, to validate trends and strengthen coordinated intervention. Each survey item is linked to a defined outreach workflow specifying who responds, what actions are taken, and how follow-up is communicated to students. This poster highlights the survey design, real-time communication model, identity-aware support strategies, and early outcomes demonstrating how integrated analytics and rapid outreach create a proactive, student-centered approach to early-term retention.

Wednesday, 10/21/2026

4:45–5:45 p.m.

Poster

Grande Promenade

Reimagining the First Year: An Integrated Model of Academic, Residential, and Co-Curricular Support

Julia Van Steenberghe, University of Maine

Laura Millay, University of Maine

Sarah Johnson, University of Maine

Jason Harkins, University of Maine

Heather S. Pixley, University of Maine

McFrederick Obiri-Tetteh, University of Maine

T. Scott Marzilli, University of Maine

Debra Allen, University of Maine

Abstract: This poster highlights the design, implementation, and outcomes of a comprehensive, college-level first-year experience within the Maine Business School at the University of Maine. Grounded in the belief that student success is strengthened through coordinated, high-impact practices, this model intentionally integrates academic and co-curricular components across the first year. Key elements include a required bridge-week student transition experience, a required first-year research course, and a business-focused living-learning community. Together, these experiences are structured to foster belonging, support academic transition, and build early connections to the institution and field of study. The poster outlines the program's guiding philosophy, emphasizing collaboration across academic affairs, student affairs, and residence life to create a seamless student experience. It also details the approach to alignment, including shared learning outcomes, coordinated messaging, and intentional touchpoints throughout the first semester. Findings from three years of implementation are presented, drawing on both quantitative metrics (retention, academic performance, engagement data) and qualitative insights (student feedback, focus groups, and reflections). Results indicate increased student engagement, stronger peer and faculty connections, and improved persistence outcomes. This model offers a scalable framework for institutions seeking to enhance first-year student success through integrated, cross-functional design.

Thursday, 10/22/2026
8:00–9:00 a.m.

Poplar/Providence/Stratford Hall

CSRDE Best Practices Awards Breakfast

Abstract: The Awards Breakfast is included in your conference registration. Guests may join you for \$50 per person. See one of the conference staff for details or questions. Join us for a delicious meal and opportunities for networking with other colleagues. At the end of the meal we'll begin recognition of the conference papers receiving the Best Practices in Student Retention, Institutional Research Leadership in Student Retention, and the Director's Awards, as well as the Best Poster Award.

Thursday, 10/22/2026
9:15–10:15 a.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Stratford Hall

Beyond the First Year: A Collaborative Framework for Student Persistence in the Second Year and Beyond

Paris McPherson, West Chester University

Abstract: College students experiencing academic difficulty often face challenges that extend beyond the classroom, including navigating financial challenges, institutional policies, and unfamiliar campus systems. This session uses a case study approach to examine how these intersecting barriers contribute to academic risk for continuing students, particularly in the second year and beyond. Through a series of student cases, participants will explore how academic probation, financial aid eligibility, registration barriers, and unclear communication can compound and hinder persistence. The session introduces a collaborative framework that aligns retention support, financial aid, advising, registration, and learning support to move from siloed interventions to coordinated, student-centered strategies. A key emphasis of the session is helping participants identify where their current institutional practices may unintentionally place the burden of coordination on students, particularly those who are less familiar with navigating higher education systems.

Thursday, 10/22/2026

9:15–10:15 a.m.

Paper

Poplar Hall

Designing an Integrated First-Year Experience: Insights From Student Focus Groups

Sarah Johnson, University of Maine

Julia Van Steenberghe, University of Maine

Heather S. Pixley, University of Maine

Laura Millay, University of Maine

McFrederick Obiri-Tetteh, University of Maine

Jason Harkins, University of Maine

T. Scott Marzilli, University of Maine

Debra Allen, University of Maine

Abstract: This paper examines a comprehensive first-year experience (FYE) model at the Maine Business School (MBS) at the University of Maine that integrates an early, discipline-specific transition program with coordinated curricular, co-curricular, and residential components. Drawing from two semi-structured focus groups with 17 first-year business students who participated in the third cohort of the MBS FYE, we explore how students perceive the model's impact on their transition, sense of belonging, and emerging academic and professional identities. Students describe Bridge Week, an introductory business course modified to include cohort group collaboration on a group project, embedded peer leaders, professional development events, and a business-specific living learning community as a mutually reinforcing ecosystem that made the transition to college less intimidating and fostered a strong connection to MBS. At the same time, they identified challenges related to recurring messaging, uneven group work, and a business silo that could make it harder to connect beyond the discipline. We discuss implications for designing high-impact, discipline-specific FYEs that balance structure with autonomy and intentionally scaffold students' connections outward. We outline concrete program refinements relevant to institutions seeking sustainable, student-centered approaches to first-year success and retention.

Thursday, 10/22/2026
9:15–10:15 a.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Merrimac

Who's at the Table? Building Collaborative Strategies for Student Retention

Allie Mills, University of North Alabama

Rickey McCreless, University of North Alabama

Abstract: Student retention is influenced by a complex set of academic, financial, and social factors, yet institutional responses often remain fragmented across campus units. Research consistently demonstrates that collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs improves student success outcomes, but many institutions struggle to translate this knowledge into coordinated action. This facilitated discussion introduces “Who’s at the Table? Building Collaborative Strategies for Student Retention,” a practical framework designed to help institutions align stakeholders, identify shared student success priorities, and develop collaborative strategies that support retention. Using examples from the University of North Alabama, presenters will briefly highlight how cross-campus partnerships—such as advising collaborations, experiential learning initiatives, and campus-wide student success programming—can strengthen institutional support systems. Participants will then engage in structured dialogue and guided reflection using the framework to:

- Develop a student-centered essential question related to retention or student success
- Identify key cross-campus stakeholders needed to address that question
- Outline a 30, 60, and 90 day collaborative action plan to initiate or strengthen partnerships

The session prioritizes peer exchange and applied learning. Attendees will leave with a replicable framework, practical planning tools, and actionable strategies to foster stronger cross-campus collaboration that advances student retention.

Thursday, 10/22/2026
10:30–11:30 a.m.

Paper

Merrimac

Eliciting Trust During The First Year Experience: The Importance of Advising and Watchlists

Diann Cameron Kelly, Adelphi University

Abstract: Trust is the invisible infrastructure of student success. Academic advising and watchlists, when thoughtfully integrated, serve as powerful tools to build that trust during the critical first year. Institutions that approach these systems with intentionality, transparency, and empathy will not only improve retention but also foster a campus culture where students feel genuinely supported and valued. This is a timely topic—especially given how much first-year retention depends on early relationships and proactive support. The first year of college is a pivotal transition marked by academic, social, and emotional adjustment. Academic advising is often the most consistent point of contact between students and the institution during the first year. Effective advising goes beyond course selection—it is developmental, holistic, and relational. Watchlists (or early alert systems) are institutional tools used to identify students who may be at academic or personal risk. These systems typically draw from data such as attendance, grades, LMS (learning management system) engagement, and faculty referrals. The most effective institutions do not treat advising and watchlists as separate systems—they integrate them. This paper will highlight the power of trust in the first-year experience and how advisors play a key role in the deposit to enrollment and first year experience.

Thursday, 10/22/2026
10:30–11:30 a.m.

Facilitated Discussion

Poplar Hall

From Strategy to Scale: Activating Student Success Priorities Through Campus Partnerships

Monica Griffin Madura, University of Iowa
Mirra Anson, University of Iowa

Abstract: Institutions across higher education have crafted ambitious strategic plans to enhance student success, retention, and graduation rates. However, many face challenges in translating these plans from vision to consistent, measurable results. This facilitated discussion explores how The University of Iowa has intentionally aligned their institutional and college-level strategic plans with proactive, coordinated interventions that led to a measurable gains instudent success outcomes. Participants will engage in a structured conversation focused on translating strategic priorities into operational practice through cross-campus partnerships, advising reform, and data-informed decision-making. The session will showcase how the college has moved beyond static planning documents to implement proactive interventions that support students at critical points in their academic journey, with particular attention to retention, progression, and completion. The discussion will also explore how institution-wide policy contexts, early alert systems, and sustained, multi-year interventions facilitate student persistence beyond the first year, especially for students at risk of stopping out during their second year and beyond. Senior Leaders will be invited to reflect on their own institutional contexts, identify barriers that keep strategic plans “on the shelf,” and share approaches for aligning leadership, resources, and accountability structures.