A Third of Your Freshmen Disappear. How Can You Keep Them?

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When the first-year retention rate at Southern Utah University fell five percentage points over five years, college administrators there knew they had a problem. They just weren't sure what to do about it.

"They were at a loss, and frankly, we were, too," recalls Jared N. Tippets, who was hired three years ago to reverse the trend.

The institution had tried several of the "high impact" practices that are supposed to help with retention — learning communities, common reading programs — but students kept leaving. By 2015, only 64 percent of freshmen were returning for their sophomore year.

So Tippets, the chief retention officer and vice president for student affairs, and his team started from scratch, building a comprehensive "first-year experience" that combined financial support with enhanced advising, earlier identification of struggling students, and a focus on fostering a sense of belonging. They overhauled orientation, redesigned the first-year seminar, and created a new peer-mentoring program, among other changes.

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At the University of Texas at Austin, an online pre-orientation session includes messages from current students describing how they overcame their own feelings that they didn't belong or weren't smart enough. Prior research by David Yeager, an associate professor of psychology, showed that disadvantaged students who heard the messages were likelier to complete 12 credit hours than were those who got only the usual, practical information about the college transition.