Some Definitions Related to Retention and Persistence

**Cohort:** A cohort is a specific group. For example, retention rates are based on the cohort (specific group) of first-time, degree-seeking undergraduate students enrolling at an institution in a given fall. Retention rates at four-year institutions are based on bachelor’s degree-seeking students.

**Peer Institution:** A peer institution is an institution that has been identified as having similar characteristics (such as enrollment, tuition, SAT scores, state budget allocation, location, etc.) to the comparing institution (CCRI, RIC, or URI). The peer institutions are used for comparative purposes and for benchmarking performance in areas such as retention and persistence.

**Aspirational Peer Institution:** An aspirational peer institution is an institution that has similar characteristics to the comparing institution, but is more advanced in certain areas. The aspirational peers are used for identifying areas for improvement in the comparing institution.

**Retention Rate:** The retention rate is the percentage of a given cohort that enrolled at the institution the following fall (e.g., the percentage of bachelor’s degree-seeking students who enrolled at RIC in fall 1998 and returned in fall 1999). Retention rates may be reported over subsequent years (e.g., those in the fall 1998 cohort who returned in fall 1999, in fall 2000 and in fall 2001).

**Normal Time to Completion:** The amount of time necessary to complete all requirements for a degree or certificate according to the institution's catalog. Normal time is typically four years for a bachelor's degree and two years for an associate's degree. Normal time varies for certificate programs. The federal Student Right-to-Know Act requires that graduation rates be calculated on the percentage of a cohort that completes a degree or certificate within 150 percent of normal time.

**Persistence:** Persistence refers to the act of continuing towards an educational goal (e.g., earning a bachelor’s degree).

**Attainment:** Attainment refers to achieving an educational goal such as a certificate or degree.

**Attrition:** Attrition refers to a decrease in the size of the cohort. Attrition occurs when students drop out (fail to re-enroll) or stop out (do not re-enroll continuously).
How to Read Retention Tables

Tables and charts, showing numbers and percentages, have been prepared for cohorts of full-time, degree-seeking students (or subsets of those cohorts). The tables provided by the three institutions have been prepared in slightly different ways, but the example below provides a general explanation of how to read retention and graduation rates. **Retention rates:** The first lines of the tables below show that of the 800 full-time, degree-seeking female students who entered in fall 1995, 600 had returned in fall 1996, for a one-year retention rate of 75%. The third column shows that 550 returned in fall 1997, so the two-year retention rate is 69%. **Graduation rates:** Graduation rates are cumulative. Within four years (or before fall 1999), 200 (25%) of them had graduated; 200 hundred more, for a total of 400 or 50%, had graduated within five years, and 100 more, for a total of 500 or 63%, had graduated within six years (before fall 2001).

**Sample Tables:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># in Cohort</th>
<th>Returned for 2nd year</th>
<th>Returned for 3rd Year</th>
<th>Grad. in 4 years</th>
<th>Grad. in 5 years</th>
<th>Grad. in 6 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 1995 freshmen</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 1996 freshmen</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>595</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>186</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Returned for 2nd year</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>75%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 1996 freshmen</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Some Factors Related to Retention and Persistence**

- Regarding enrollment patterns:
  - Delaying enrollment into postsecondary education by as little as one year after high school is associated with lower rates of persistence and attainment of outcomes.
  - Full-time enrollment is associated with higher rates of persistence and attainment.
  - Breaking the continuity of enrollment (i.e., “stopping out”) is related to lower overall persistence and attainment.
- Students who complete a rigorous high school curriculum have higher levels of persistence and attainment; transfer students who complete a rigorous high school curriculum are more likely than other transfer students to attain a degree.
- African-American, Hispanic and Native American students and students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds tend to have lower levels of persistence and attainment.
- Students who enroll in less-selective four-year institutions are less likely to persist than those who enroll in more-selective institutions; students attending public four-year institutions take longer to complete bachelor’s degrees than those attending independent institutions.
- Regarding bachelor’s degree-seeking students who initially enroll in a community college:
  - These students take longer to earn a degree than those who begin at four-year institutions.
  - Many students who originally intend to transfer to a four-year institution fail to do so.
  - Those students who do transfer, however, are equally as likely as those who began at four-year institutions to persist to a degree.
- Bachelor’s degree-seeking students who receive financial aid graduate at the same rate as those who do not receive aid. However, certificate and associate’s degree-seeking students who receive financial aid graduate at a higher rate than those who do not receive aid.
- Students who work full-time have lower rates of persistence and attainment.