

Student Retention & Success

Synthesized from 8 sources 15 findings · April 18, 2026

Why This Matters

Online retention is not a counseling problem — it is an operational design problem, and most small and mid-sized institutions are under-engineered for it. With **71% of online learners completing without interruption** (Risepoint 2026), the remaining 29% represent real tuition revenue, real credential gaps, and real reputational risk at institutions that cannot absorb the margin loss. The 36.8 million adults in the Some College, No Credential population — growing at 2.9% annually — means the pipeline of re-enrollable students is expanding faster than most institutions' capacity to serve them (EducationDynamics 2025).

1. The Online Learner Who Is Already Halfway Out the Door

The student at the center of your retention challenge is not a recent high school graduate struggling with academic adjustment. She is most likely a working adult who stopped out of a prior institution, accumulated credits she cannot use, and re-enrolled online because she needed flexibility — not because she felt connected. More than 90% of online learners had stopped out of postsecondary education before re-enrolling online, and nearly 40% had been out for less than a year (EducationDynamics 2024). Seventy percent of undergraduate stopouts carried credits but no credential — meaning they arrived with prior academic momentum and prior academic disappointment in the same backpack.

She is also comparison shopping after she enrolls. **32% of enrolled students continue researching alternative institutions after initial enrollment**, and only one-third of all modern learners describe themselves as promoters of their educational experience (EducationDynamics 2025). Among traditional undergraduates, that promoter share drops to 24% — though fully online students fare better at 41%. The operational implication is direct: enrollment is not the finish line. The first eight weeks of a student's experience are effectively a second enrollment decision, and institutions that treat onboarding as an administrative handoff rather than a retention intervention will keep losing students they already paid to recruit.

2. The Three Stopout Triggers Institutions Can Actually Influence

The reasons online learners stop out are not mysteries — they are predictable, patterned, and partially preventable. **Difficulty balancing academic, professional, and personal commitments** is the leading stopout driver at 28%, followed by unforeseen life events (28%) and difficulty balancing work and school (27%) (Risepoint 2025; Risepoint 2026). Inability to afford tuition accounts for 19% of stopouts (Risepoint 2025). What makes these figures operationally useful is what learners say would have kept them enrolled: **increased**

financial aid or scholarships (34%), improved instructor communication (32%), and more flexible scheduling options (29%) (Risepoint 2026).

These are not aspirational requests. They are service failures institutions can fix. On the financial side, 40% of online learners have access to employer tuition assistance — but 67% of them do not use it (Risepoint 2025). The barriers are concrete: 21% say they do not understand how to use the benefit, 21% object to post-employment obligations, and 21% say the amount is insufficient. Institutions that build a dedicated employer benefit navigation workflow — connecting admitted students to benefit coordinators before the first tuition bill — can move that utilization rate. Similarly, instructor communication is not a faculty culture problem; it is a workload design and expectation-setting problem. Response time standards, structured mid-course check-ins, and early alert triggers are configurable. **Audit your instructor communication standards this term, and set written response-time expectations of 24–48 hours in every course by the start of next term.**

3. The Retention Infrastructure Gap When OPM Support Goes Away

Institutions transitioning away from OPM partnerships often discover that what they called "retention support" was actually living inside the OPM's platform and staffing model — not inside their own operations. Effective retention of online learners requires that students can access support resources and operational offices **remotely and outside regular business hours** (Collegis Education 2025). That is a staffing and systems commitment, not a policy statement. At the same time, institutions must establish clear KPIs and data-driven processes for identifying at-risk students and proactively engaging them — capabilities that are typically embedded in OPM platforms and must be deliberately rebuilt when managing programs internally (Collegis Education 2025).

Graduate persistence benchmarks offer a concrete baseline for evaluating whether your infrastructure is performing:

Metric	Benchmark	Source
Term-to-term persistence rate	92%	RNL 2025
Year-over-year retention rate	80%	RNL 2025
Start-to-graduate rate	70%	RNL 2025
Programs completed without interruption (online learners)	71–76%	Risepoint 2025, 2026
Graduate stopout rate	17%	Risepoint 2025
Undergraduate stopout rate	38%	Risepoint 2025

If your institution does not have term-to-term persistence tracked by program and modality in a live dashboard, you are managing retention reactively. **Within 60 days, identify which data system owns your early alert function, confirm it generates proactive outreach (not just reports), and assign a named staff owner accountable for at-risk intervention at the program level.**

4. Re-Enrollment as a Retention Strategy: The SCNC Opportunity

Most retention conversations focus on keeping currently enrolled students — but the 36.8 million adults in the Some College, No Credential population represent a second-chance retention play that most small institutions are not systematically pursuing (EducationDynamics 2025). Re-enrollment among this population grew **9.1% in 2022–23**, and nearly 7% of SCNC students transition from a public two-year institution to a primarily online institution — a meaningful pathway for institutions with the right programs and the right credit recognition policies (EducationDynamics 2025).

The conversion lever is not marketing. It is credit transfer clarity. Credit transfer policies significantly impact enrollment decisions for more than half of stopped-out non-traditional undergraduates, and **82% of non-degree-seeking students intend to apply their current studies toward future credentials** (EducationDynamics 2025). These students are already doing the math on how many of their prior credits will count before they commit to re-enrollment. Institutions whose websites bury transfer credit policies behind a "contact us" form are functionally invisible to this population. **Audit your transfer credit communication for online programs by the end of this quarter — every program page should display maximum transferable credits, a process timeline, and a direct contact for transcript evaluation within two clicks.**

5. Retention Operations Audit: A 30–60–90 Day Action Sequence

Days 1–30: Diagnose

1. Pull term-to-term persistence and stopout rates by program, modality, and student level (undergraduate vs. graduate). If you cannot generate this report in 48 hours, your data infrastructure is the first problem to solve.
2. Audit current instructor communication standards in your online programs. Document whether written response-time expectations exist, where they live, and whether they are monitored.
3. Map every student-facing support function and confirm which are accessible outside 9–5, Monday–Friday. Flag every gap.

Days 31–60: Prioritize 4. Identify your three highest-stopout programs. Assign a retention owner to each — not a committee, a person — and set a 90-day engagement target. 5. Build or activate an early alert workflow with defined trigger points: missed login, missed assignment, no instructor contact by week three. Define the outreach sequence — channel, timing, and owner for each touch. 6. Review your transfer credit policy pages for online programs. Rewrite any that require a prospective student to call or email to get basic information.

Days 61–90: Intervene 7. Launch an employer benefit navigation protocol for newly enrolled students in the first two weeks of their first term. Assign one staff contact to walk students through tuition assistance access before their first bill is due. 8. Design one optional campus touchpoint — a virtual or in-person event tied to completion milestones or orientation — that does not require travel as a condition of participation. **81% of online learners now say they would like to visit campus at some point** (Risepoint 2026); give them a structured on-ramp. 9. Set 90-day benchmarks against the RNL and Risepoint figures above, and schedule a standing quarterly review with whoever owns enrollment management and academic affairs.

The single most important shift administrators can make is to stop treating retention as a student success function and start treating it as an institutional design function. The reasons students stop out – scheduling inflexibility, financial friction, inadequate instructor contact – are not personal failures; they are service gaps that show up as revenue losses on the back end. Institutions that build proactive, data-driven, around-the-clock retention infrastructure will outperform those that rely on good faculty relationships and hope. The question is not whether your institution values student success. The question is whether your operations are actually built to deliver it – and whether you are willing to look honestly at the answer.

References

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