

# Beyond the Plateau: Designing Retention Experiments While the System Is Still Moving

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**Guests:** John Rindy, Assistant Vice President for Career and Academic Progress  
Emily McClain, Associate Director for Academic Success Design

**Institution:** Slippery Rock University

**Host:** Katy Oliveira, Civitas Learning

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## TRANSCRIPT

**Katy Oliveira** 00:05

Welcome back to the Next Practices podcast. Today we're diving into a fascinating case study on student success and the danger of institutional assumptions. We're joined by two leaders from Slippery Rock University who are doing more than just hitting their retention targets — they are fundamentally reexamining the relationship between the university and the student.

We talk about why hitting your retention goals might actually be the most dangerous time for your institution to stop learning, how to experiment with student success while the university is still in motion, and how to move the campus from a conversation about what's wrong with these students to one about what's wrong with our assumptions about them. Please welcome John Rindy and Emily McClain to the show.

**John Rindy** 01:11

Great to be here.

**Emily McClain** 01:13

Thanks for having us.

**Katy Oliveira** 01:14

Before we get started, I'd love for you each to introduce yourselves and share a bit about Slippery Rock University. John, let's start with you.

**John Rindy** 01:29

Thank you. I'm John Rindy, Assistant Vice President for Career and Academic Progress at Slippery Rock University. I've been here about 15 years. Emily and I are both part of the enrollment management family — the folks that keep students here and propel them into careers.

Slippery Rock is a regional comprehensive university. We average about 8,800 students in the fall. We offer bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees across the classic disciplines, with particular strengths in safety management — we have the largest campus-based program in the country — as well as six accredited engineering programs and robust health sciences graduate programs in physical therapy, occupational therapy, and physician assistant studies.

**Emily McClain** 02:22

Hi, I'm Emily McClain. I'm the Associate Director for Academic Success Design within our Center for Career and Academic Progress. I oversee our success coaching program and a variety of initiatives that support student academic success and thriving.

**Katy Oliveira** 02:37

I love that your title includes the word design. Here at Civitas Learning, we say that student success is not an initiative — it's an operating system. Design really lends itself to that idea: this is a process and a way of being at an institution, not a one-off program.

**Emily McClain** 03:13

Absolutely. It was an intentional choice that John and I made. It comes from our foundation in life design and our training with Stanford University on design thinking. We embed design thinking into everything we do.

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## On the Danger of Complacency — and What Comes After Low-Hanging Fruit

**Katy Oliveira** 03:35

John, you've noted many times that as retention numbers strengthen, the work actually becomes more complex rather than easier. Many institutions plateau when the obvious best practices are exhausted. Can you talk about the mindset shift required to keep experimenting and learning when the system is already performing well? And why is it dangerous to stop learning once the metrics look good?

**John Rindy** 04:42

The modern philosopher Eric Hoffer said something to the effect that the person who has finished learning is preparing to live in a world that no longer exists. The moment we stop learning about ourselves, our students, and our data, we freeze our retention practice in place.

We have a great enrollment year ahead — a record-high average GPA for our incoming class — which means Emily and I have a lot of designing to do. First, you have to have people who love the data and want to ask hard questions of it. We have a monthly meeting with our Director for Analytics and Decision Support, Dr. Kevin McCarthy, where all we do is write research questions on the board and spend 90 minutes digging into data to answer them — and ask whether we should design a retention experiment around each one.

For example, once we addressed undeclared students — who were leaving at around a 45% rate before our interventions and are now persisting at around 85% — we had to ask: now what? We're currently looking at second-semester attrition. We're only losing about 5% of our first-year class in the first semester, but closer to 9% in the second. To us, that's newly uncovered low-hanging fruit.

**Emily McClain** 07:06

Complacency is something I genuinely can't get my head around. Having natural curiosity and acknowledging that change is constant is foundational to this work. Just because we're doing a

great job doesn't mean students are going to stop living and growing — so how could we afford to?

What happened for us is that as persistence rates improved, the high-to-low prediction categories stopped being useful. We shifted to quartiles. You'll always have students in the bottom quartile — the averages may shift, but those students are always there. As we've refined our efforts, we focus on the bottom quartile even when those students wouldn't have been considered high-risk by older benchmarks.

**Katy Oliveira** 08:22

The goal line moves, but there's still going to be variation in student success. It's not like you've eliminated the need by hitting your retention number — you're constantly reevaluating how you look for those opportunities.

**John Rindy** 08:58

Exactly. And it's not always up to our center to solve every issue. Sometimes we turn to partners — which gets into institutional culture. Do you have a heavily siloed culture? Resistant deans? Resistant faculty? Or can you walk into a dean's office and be welcomed? Here at Slippery Rock, we usually get yeses. And we have a core belief: nobody in higher education is successful sitting in their office waiting for things to happen. My saying is: take it to the people.

Our tutors don't wait for students to find them — they set up a table outside of Gen Chem I, our highest-DFW course, on the first day of class. We've also worked hard to help students understand that they've paid for tutoring, they've paid to raise their hand when they have a question — and they shouldn't feel bad about using those resources.

**Emily McClain** 10:54

We do a lot of work to help students break down the dysfunctional beliefs that affect their success and push against the stigma around help-seeking. And there's a cyclical pressure built into our work that also fights complacency: the students we have right now will be gone in four years and new students will arrive. You have to keep working for the students who aren't here yet. There's a pressure to try something, assess it, and iterate — and if leadership demands a verdict in two weeks and then a cut-or-keep decision, that's not conducive to the initiative thriving. We need longitudinal assessment plans and the space to refine.

**Katy Oliveira** 12:20

That is so important. The idea of treating these less as initiatives and more as experiments is an empowering shift — these aren't disconnected actions, they're systems that have to evolve. I've heard you use the phrase 'learning while the system is still moving.' A great example is the experiment you designed with the Women in Business organization. Can you walk us through that?

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## Case Study: The Women in Business Retention Experiment

**John Rindy** 13:43

The idea came from a few directions. Using the Initiative Impact tool in the Civitas Learning platform, Emily and I discovered that our fraternity and sorority life has a strong positive impact on student persistence semester to semester — out of about 70 students who joined Greek life in the fall, 69 are still enrolled. Students are almost generating retention in and of themselves through the relationships they're building.

That made me ask: are we missing something by not partnering with student organizations on retention experiments? Around the same time, a new organization was forming in our College of Business — Women in Business, or WIB — led by some of the most outstanding students on campus. I knew it was going to take off.

We had also noticed something worth examining in our data: female students, who typically persist at higher rates than male students nationally, had been persisting at lower rates than males here over the past few years. So I approached the WIB president and vice president — Andrea and Crislin — and asked if they'd like to be part of a designed retention experiment. The idea: as they grow their new organization, we'd help them recruit strong students, build in deliberate mentoring and engagement with executives in residence, and create programming exclusive to their club. Then we look back and ask: what was the retention rate of female students in those majors before this engagement, and what is it after?

We have faculty advisors — Dr. Nichols and Dr. Vita — who are supporting it as well. And if this proves successful, think about the possibilities across the 200+ clubs and organizations on a campus like ours.

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## On Building a Coalition — and Navigating Pushback

**Katy Oliveira** 16:50

Coalition building is not always as easy as it sounds. There can be long-held institutional assumptions that are hard to shift, and data that challenges those assumptions can feel threatening. How do you get faculty and staff on board with these experiments — and open to findings that might challenge what they believe to be true?

**Emily McClain** 18:32

I had a situation recently where we identified some course-level signals through the Civitas platform — a flag around the grade of C being a tipping point, and high DFW rates in certain courses. When I raised those with the faculty involved, some defensiveness came up. In that moment, I had to pause and put myself in their shoes. The goal isn't to attack their teaching or curriculum — it's to identify students who are struggling and get to them. We want to use big data points to drive small, meaningful changes.

The coalition-building tips come back to what we try to do for students. We want to build strong relationships with our students — and we need to build strong relationships with each other. That can't just be us asking for what we need. It has to be us getting to know our colleagues, caring about them, showing up for them, celebrating them.

We use a framework from Peter Felton and Leo Lambert's Relationship-Rich Education, which centers four principles: students need to experience genuine welcome and deep care; students need to be inspired to learn; students need a web of significant relationships; and students need to explore questions of meaning and purpose. We discuss those principles in our success

advocate training — and then we apply those same principles to our relationships with campus colleagues. Am I showing my faculty partner genuine welcome and deep care? Am I inspiring them to engage in this collaboration? When I start treating campus partners the way I treat students, my whole approach to those conversations changes.

**John Rindy** 21:44

Emily and I have each been at Slippery Rock for nine and fifteen years, respectively. We've built a lot of relationships. We have a genuine drop-in culture. When we walk into a dean's office with an idea — 'we've noticed you're losing this many students in the second semester; we think that can change; would you like to work with us?' — we usually get a yes. People know us. They know we have good hearts for this institution, that we love students like our own kids. That trust is infrastructure.

Slippery Rock has been in the 80%+ retention range since 2008. This isn't new work. But moving from 86% toward 87% — and I'd love to see 90% before I retire — requires us to see it in the data, one piece at a time, harnessing different departments and helping people experience, care about, and get excited by results.

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## On Challenging Assumptions — Including Our Own

**Katy Oliveira** 24:35

I want to talk about assumptions — assumptions about how students behave, what they're capable of, what they'll do. Data can be surprising. Sometimes it challenges what we think we know. Can you talk about how you help your campus challenge those common assumptions?

**John Rindy** 26:22

In a recent data meeting, I challenged Emily and Dr. McCarthy to sit with a question I'd been turning over. Carnegie Mellon, right down the road from us, retains students into year two at around 98%. Slippery Rock is the second most competitive school for admissions in Western Pennsylvania behind CMU. But what assumptions are we making about our students that are driving the 14% we lose? Every institution should ask that question.

We also challenge students' assumptions. We tell them: Slippery Rock is not a place you come to give it the old college try. We expect you to attend class, use resources, graduate, and find work that makes you joyful. And we communicate that expectation through the entire admissions funnel.

**Emily McClain** 28:18

At the core of my professional identity, I'm a coach first. Coaching psychology grounds everything I do — and one of the central commitments of a coach is limitless positive regard for the person in front of you. Our approach leans heavily anti-deficit. There's an ancient proverb I encountered recently: the acorn falling from the oak tree already contains everything it needs to become an oak tree. Of course it needs the right environment — soil, sunlight, nutrients — but the makeup is already there. Why don't we think of our students that way?

As higher ed practitioners, we have to constantly examine what biases are clouding how we see student potential. Cultural competency training, anti-deficit frameworks, courageous

conversations with colleagues about our own blind spots — these are not optional. They are the work.

**John Rindy** 30:18

The concept of value also factors in here. If 98% of Carnegie Mellon students see enough value to come back, and 90% of James Madison students do — what value are 14% of Slippery Rock students not seeing that prompts them to leave? We have many of the same opportunities: undergraduate research, job shadows, micro-internships, company-sponsored projects. Are we conveying that value clearly enough? That question drives a lot of our work.

**Emily McClain** 31:54

And what environments do we give students to puzzle through their questions about the value of their degree and their time here? Life design conversations, values exploration, goal-mapping, identifying what's getting in the way — students need a space for those conversations. It might not be happening in a 15-minute advising session before registration. It's the university's job to create that space and help students find their way into it.

**John Rindy** 33:09

When our admissions staff give tours, they stop outside our office suite. I was walking through one day when a tour was coming through, and I heard the tour guide say: 'Through these doors is the opportunity to be the best version of you possible.' I had to stop and say hello to that group. That is exactly what we've been aiming for.

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## Closing Thoughts

**Katy Oliveira** 33:38

Before we wrap up — are there any lessons learned or takeaways you'd like to share that we haven't covered yet?

**John Rindy** 34:22

Risk-taking has to be allowed. I work hard to make sure everyone in our center knows they can invent, ideate, and experiment. That culture flows from having a supervisor — Mike May — who wants us to experiment, and before him, Dr. Yale, who rewarded us for trying, measuring, adjusting, and adapting. It makes for a genuinely good place to come to work.

**Emily McClain** 35:12

In higher education, there are some topics — challenging assumptions, naming complacency, talking honestly about what isn't working — that feel like the things you're not supposed to bring up at the dinner table. But let's talk about them. Having the courage to name the elephant in the room is where the real growth happens.

We've been using the language of auditing — auditing our individual success advocacy, auditing departmental practices for how they support retention. I'd encourage listeners to audit your own willingness to lean into challenging assumptions and go beyond complacency. Our team reflects

a great deal, both individually and together. That reflection has been part of the magic of what's happening here.

**Katy Oliveira** 36:47

Without that honest evaluation, you'll keep making the same mistakes and stay stuck. We live in a world where you have to be responsive, proactive, and paying attention — you can't sit back and wait. You have to know what's working and what isn't. The data and infrastructure matter. But what you've added today — the willingness to honestly evaluate assumptions, to test, experiment, and iterate — is the equally powerful piece of the puzzle. Thank you both so much for joining the show.

**John Rindy** 38:01

Absolute pleasure, Katie. Always great to see you, whether in person or on Zoom.

**Emily McClain** 38:07

Thanks, Katie.