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# Discovering Strategies to Remove Barriers to Student Successful Retention and Successful Persistence

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**Abstract:** This case study explores a Catholic, Jesuit high school's efforts to systematize a long-term strategic process to explore student attrition, retention, and successful persistence. Schools tend to do an exemplary job of gathering data on these issues, but investing staffing, resources, and time to do a regular deep dive analysis of the data, identifying the barriers contributing to attrition, and then determining next action steps to improve on retention and successful persistence efforts can prove elusive. A long-term strategy for the school involves key constituents, offices, and departments in the school working in collaboration with one another to address issues of student attrition and retention. School mission, school finances, ideal student enrollment number, academic expectations/requirements, student support systems, student culture/climate, post high school experiences etc. are all linked to issues of student inclusion, attrition, retention, and successful persistence. While a case-by-case approach has been successful, a macro strategic approach is needed that addresses these efforts overall on a larger scale with equitable policies, resource allocation, and processes in place that are transparent and accessible to anyone in the community. This case study studied a school's attempt for a more large-scale, mission centered strategic approach to gather data by exploring the barriers students face in their successful persistence at the school, data analysis models that can inform and address these barriers, and to determine an ongoing process for discussion, analysis, and action steps for the school to embark on. This includes schools looking at student attrition, retention, and successful persistence through a mission focus lens, the demographic trends of the clientele the school is serving, and its long-term sustainability.

**Keywords:** Student Attrition, Student Retention, Student Successful Persistence, School Mission Focus, Class Profile, Collaborative Leadership, Strategic Leadership

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## 1. Introduction

Results from a case study are reported. This manuscript explores a Catholic high school's efforts to systematize a long-term strategic process to explore student attrition, retention and successful persistence. Schools tend to do an exemplary job of gathering data on these issues, but investing staffing, resources, and time to do a regular deep dive analysis of the data, identifying the barriers contributing to attrition, and then determining next action steps to improve on retention and successful persistence efforts can prove elusive. Many schools often react to current situations often taking a case-by-case troubleshooting approach rather than anticipating and staying steadfast to a comprehensive long-term strategy for the school. A long-term strategy for the school involves key constituents, offices, and departments in

the school working together in collaboration with one another to address issues of student attrition and retention. School mission, school finances, ideal student enrollment number, academic expectations/requirements, student support systems, student culture/climate, post high school experiences etc. are all linked to issues of student inclusion, attrition, retention, and successful persistence.

This is a case study of Catholic Jesuit high school consisting of over 1700 students that endeavored to explore these issues by pursuing the institutional strategic goal of removing real and perceived barriers for any prospective student who desired to attend and successfully persist at that high school. The hope was in removing/minimizing these barriers this would address issues of student attrition, retention and successful persistence strategically more at a macro level. This macro level strategic approach would lead

to a more efficient, effective, and equitable method for the allocation of resources to those students/families in need to sustain them at the school. This macro scale approach would accompany the well established case by case approaches that comprised most this school's efforts up to this point, when it came to addressing student retention efforts. While a case-by-case approach has been successful, this school needed a macro strategic approach that addresses these efforts overall on a larger scale with equitable policies and processes in place that are transparent and accessible to anyone in the community. In addition, the goal was to have a system in place a working group for ongoing dialogue on the student attrition data gathered, look for trends in the data in alignment with mission focus for possible targeted future action steps. An additional goal would be for the case study Catholic school to be able to discern and have the discipline to move towards an overall class profile that finds the right balance of proper enrollment while maximizing resources of the school with its mission focus. This case study seeks to pursue a more large-scale, mission centered strategic approach to gather data by exploring the following questions:

1. What are some of the real and perceived barriers to successful student retention and persistence at this specific Catholic, Jesuit high school?
2. What are qualitative and quantitative data analysis models that can determine the meaning of the attrition data once it is gathered for school officials and faculty specific and unique to this specific Catholic, Jesuit high school?
3. What are considerations and recommendations for schools that endeavor to strategically assess institutional student attrition while improving retention through successfully proven persistence efforts?
4. This case study explored these questions through historiography, interviews with ninth grade faculty, and survey results.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature review for this study focuses on the case study school context and its surrounding context. This context focuses on presenting data on student attrition in the form of dropout rates on multiple levels for comparison, as well as presenting a historical overview of the school that led to strategic mission aspects and action steps that the Catholic school taken prior to this being set for as a major strategic initiative or in the school's language a "bold move". These preemptive action steps recommended by the President addressed some initial steps for student retention and sought to ensure that students had the necessary information of resources at the onset of their high school experience. This was done to mitigate the challenges these issues could pose for families during the four years and beyond at the onset.

### 2.1. Data and Demographic Trends

The number of students at this case study Catholic high school has steadily increased over the last five years. The

initial goal for this school when the single-sex girls division was created was created nearly two decades ago was approximately 1300 total students with eight hundred boys and five hundred girls [4]. Shortly after a major capital campaign to expand the campus with a theatre building, this admission number rose to having 750 girls and 850 boys attending for a total enrollment of 1600 students. This enrollment number was attained and surpassed by this school during the 2016-2017 school year and continued to expand to close to 1750 students as of the 2023-24 school year. This was at the dawn of another major capital campaign that was to take place with another major expansion of the campus to include a science building and athletic fields. The pattern of expansion and admission enrollment number increases has continued since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This new campaign as well as the subsequent strategic plan of bold moves was led by the President's leadership team and ratified by the community and Board of Trustees. It was spurred on by data gathering from an external consultant indicating that families desired a college preparatory education, greater gender equity in terms of academic expectations, resources and opportunities for women, with a continuing emphasis on the Catholic, Jesuit mission [11]. According to additional data gathering conducted by an independent entity outside of the high school, the cultural diversity of the student in terms of race and religion has also grown dramatically, which calls for the need for greater resources, programs, and leadership in these areas. In addition, due to the declining birthrate in the local area of the school, the number of high school age students will decrease over time. Other factors such as the decrease of number of Catholic schools and decreasing Catholic families, thus causing this school to extend their admission efforts farther out to independent and charter public schools [9]).

### 2.2. Data Within Catholic and Jesuit Secondary Education Schools in America

According to National Catholic Educational Association Data, Catholic high school students have been decreasing over the last decade. There are 1,169 Catholic secondary schools nationwide i. e., 2.5% of all American high schools are Catholic secondary schools. The enrollment figures for secondary schools decreased the same amount in 2020-2021 during Covid. Compared to the 2019-2020 school year, enrollment at Catholic schools was down 6.4% for the 2020-2021 school year-the biggest percentage drop in enrollment since 1973.

The enrollment figures for secondary schools decreased the same amount in 2020-2021 compared to the 2019-2020 school year, but Catholic elementary schools lost nearly 5% more students this academic year than the 2020-2021 school year. [12]

In terms of specifically Jesuit secondary education in America, the Jesuit schools network reports that the numbers overall of secondary schools attending Jesuit schools is decreasing particularly in the eastern part of the United States, but within this specific case school along with Catholic Jesuit

schools located more westward in the United States, the student enrollment number has either been maintained or slightly increasing- a pattern that has been consistent over the last five year or so [9]. In comparison to other six Catholic high schools in the area, this case study Catholic high school is the largest in terms of student enrollment and is on the costlier end in terms of tuition cost. In terms of other non-Catholic independent schools in the area, the case study school while having the largest enrollment has maintained tuition in the upper echelon of private, independent schools that are comparable. This case study school would be to maintain parity in terms of tuition costs with the other Catholic and comparable private schools in the area.

In terms of public school data on a state and local district level, the dropout rates remained consistent overall. All the school dropout data is based on the 2019-2020 school year right at the start of Covid, but also a few years before. On a state level there were slightly more male dropouts than female (2.1% males and 1.5% female). In terms of the racial breakdown of dropouts, state data indicated that dropout rates for white Caucasian students was significantly lower than Hispanic Latino and African American/Black students and only slightly lower than Asian students [6]. In terms of the local school district that the case study Catholic school is located within, the total dropout rate was 1.3% on average lower overall than the state dropout rate. It should be noted that this school district resides in a wealthier, suburban part of the city. Like the state data, the gender breakdown was negligible with 1.4% males and 1.1% of females dropping out with a slight uptick with males like the state data. In terms of racial breakdown, the dropout rate for the specific school district was slightly lower than the state, but the ratio between white student dropout rates and students from other racial demographics was very comparable with the student [5].

### 3. Methodology

The data gathering for this case study school consisted of two major aspects. It included a historiographic portion looking at the case study school that effected the admission of students since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Historiography provides the context in knowing how to move forward. Historical research examines the social parameters of how history is recorded, created, analyzed, and how the narrative is formed, shared, and presented. Historical research assumes history to be factually fluid and thus informs the present in determining how to proceed. It focuses on how events unfold, focusing specifically on the relationships and networks between people, events, phenomena, and historical situations that produce the history. History is not just about facts, but theoretical explanations and interpretations of the historical events themselves [2]. The historiography data will focus on significant milestone events in the school's history over the last three decades that affected the student enrollment in dramatic ways whether numerically or demographically. This historiographic data provides context for the subsequent

institutional action steps that took place both in the moment they were implemented and in looking back on them and the effect they had on the current state of student admissions, retention, and persistence at the case study school.

The second aspect of qualitative data was in the form of one thirty-minute interview with twelve faculty members. Ten of these faculty are teachers and two are school counselors who teach, coach, and work primarily with ninth graders. Many of them serve as part of the admission selection committee, participate in first-year onboarding and orientation activities. They were a selected sample by the President's Leadership team. Once these twelve agreed to participate, an online Microsoft teams page was created for this study group consisting of student attrition/retention articles, resources, and statistics of the school's student admission, retention, and persistence. In addition, the four following questions for the interviews were posed at least a week prior to give the twelve faculty interviewees time to reflect and prepare their thoughts.

What are the real barriers for some students that hinder their successful persistence?

What are the perceived barriers for some students that hinder their successful persistence?

What can the school influence regarding student retention and successful persistence and what is not in the school's control?

What are tipping points that can be pivotal of whether a student succeeds or fails to persist at this Catholic high school?

These interviews were transcribed with the initial transcriptions sent back to each faculty member for approval and additional edits by each of them. Upon approval, this final collective manuscript would then be disseminated to various high school constituents forming focus groups for further discussion and further contribution to the manuscript. Some of these constituents/focus group included leadership teams, random student/parent groups, department chairs, the entire staff etc.

The interview data used interrater reliability for its analysis. In qualitative studies, interrater reliability is used to strengthen the findings of a study for clarification purposes. Since findings in qualitative studies are not statistical in nature, attentive readings by several readers on a consistent basis as well as dialogue among the interview participants serve as integral to establishing an interpretation of the data that provides an understanding that is similar among the researchers involved. In a qualitative study since the researcher is the primary research tool, interrater reliability can validate their findings by minimizing researcher bias thus making the results more generalizable [10]). The coding process began with the researcher sending a transcript of the interview to each interviewee for approval, who added their edits following the interview. This was followed by an initial coding by the primary researcher sent to the same participants for them to look over and add their comments. All these interviews were then combined into one single transcript, which was sent to all interview participants to read

through. The primary researcher communicated regularly with the group to compare and discuss results- a “hashing out” to ward off disagreements [1]. A final meeting was setup for all twelve interview participants and the primary researcher to discuss the single transcript to further amplify and add to the conclusions, questions, and action steps.

### 3.1. Conceptual Framework for Analysis

The Conceptual Framework for analysis will come from documents from the school’s mission itself. This will include the school’s mission statement and its further elaboration that follows located on its website.

(Case Study) High School—a Catholic educational community—engages the gifts of young men and women in a single-gender environment, fosters faith in Jesus Christ and promotes justice and mercy, develops critical minds and nurtures compassionate hearts to serve others – all for the greater glory of God.

### 3.2. Our Way of Proceeding (School Statement of Values)

We at (Case Study School) join the faithful around the world in teaching and living the tenets of Catholic Social Teaching that call us to love of neighbor and upholding the dignity of all human life. We at (Case Study School) join our global Jesuit educational family in embracing a Faith that Lives Justice that presupposes the goodness in all people and calls us to work in solidarity with each other to lift up the most vulnerable among us. We at (Case Study) are a community that embraces reconciliation and hope for a brighter and more just future by centering ourselves on the life of Jesus Christ as our model as we endeavor to be truth-seekers guided by the Holy Spirit. We at (Case Study School) are engaged in the formation of young people who are participating in a complex and interconnected world. Our responsibility is to move the dialogue beyond the two-dimensional constructs of the current day that tend to frame every debate as ‘either/or’ or a ‘zero-sum game.’ Instead, we are called to create environments in which our students may encounter and engage multiple points of view that are presented thoughtfully and respectfully. We do not tell our students what to think; we teach them how to think and how to discern with an informed conscience. To ensure this way of proceeding remains intact, we commit to further examination of our messaging as a school community through a discerning lens. We are implementing further ongoing professional development for our faculty and staff centered around creating spaces and dialogues that honor diverse viewpoints and teach students to listen, discern and civilly participate in challenging conversations. We will further strengthen our formation especially as it relates to Catholic Social Teaching and will continue to uphold the life of Jesus Christ and those of the saints as the models of a life well-lived [7].

### 3.3. Catholic Social Teaching (CST)

Part of the theoretical framework for the analysis of the findings of this study will be the seven principles of Catholic social teaching (CST) referred to repeatedly in the

mentioned documents of the school’s mission. They are the following:

1. To ensure the Life and Dignity of Human Persons.
2. To answer the call to Family and Community Participation and being in right relationships with one another.
3. To ensure the human rights and responsibilities for human persons, which ensures the human dignity of all.
4. A preferential option to serve and care for all who are poor and vulnerable in the world.
5. To ensure the dignity of all work and the rights of all workers.
6. To live in solidarity with one another realizing that all of us as human beings are interconnected with one another.
7. Care for all God's creation realizing all of us as human beings are stewards of this planet and should care for it as such [3].

These frameworks will elaborate on the importance of the Catholic, Jesuit mission that informs the education and formation of its students and how this affects policies of inclusion, the retaining, and successful persistence of all students as integral to the mission values of the school.

## 4. Data Results

The data results include aspects of the historiography linked to major strategic steps previously taken by the school that leading to current strategic bold move to remove all real and perceived barriers. It also includes the interview data results leading to key talking points, ongoing questions for the institution to reflect on, and recommended strategic action steps specifically for ninth graders. Finally, the data results will include additional actions, considerations, and additional initiatives that are converging to address these issues of student attrition, retention, and successful persistence.

### Historiographic Data Results/Action Steps.

The first significant move by this case study Catholic school that affected student admissions and retention occurred in the early 1990s, was when it moved from the urban area of the city to the suburbs in the hopes of increasing student enrollment numbers and long-term fiscal sustainability of the school. Until this point, this Catholic school was strongly associated with the college of its namesake. This move to the suburbs would establish this school as an independent entity from the college. It also enabled the Catholic high school to transition from a neighborhood city school to a more citywide school accessible to students from the entire metropolitan area. At the time of the move, the Catholic school was still an all-boys single sex school as it had been throughout its history dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This geographic move proved successful as the enrollment of boys in the school nearly doubled in a decade to approximately eight hundred boys. While it achieved a sustainable business model, it achieved this through the increase of tuition costs and being in a more

lucrative economic location. Some alums claimed it was at the expense of accessibility to students of culturally diverse background notable the Hispanic Latino community, which it previously drew large numbers of at its previous location. Many of these students simply could not afford the increased tuition costs or could find a way to transport to the suburbs to attend the school. This would lead to several long-term alums of the high school to create a Cristo Rey Model school in the same area with the support of the College. For the case study school, concerns of accessibility and affordability along with a decrease in cultural and economic diversity initiated the creation of a more robust financial aid process, a diversity office focused on these issues of diversity, and simply making accessibility became a major priority for this school moving forward.

A few years after the move to the suburbs, conversations began about the prospect admitting girls. This led to the second significant move, which was the creation of a branch of the Catholic school that would provide a single sex education to girls. Something that was unprecedented in American Jesuit Secondary Education even though many Jesuit schools continued to maintain a male single sex education. Since Catholic high schools in the area were lacking in accessibility to girls, the case study school determined that this as major need and listened to the Catholic parents in the area. Thus, a girls division was created in the early 2000s. This posed a major culturally shift for the school, but also became integral to the emergent mission of the Catholic school on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. With the second move firmly in place, coincidentally or not, the culturally diversity of the student population more than doubled from 2005 from approximately thirteen to almost 30%. Likewise, an all-girls school, which feasibility studies in early 2001 had initially predicted would reach a capacity of four hundred young girls had surpassed 750 girls as of 2016 [11].

Prior to officially setting the strategic bold move of intentionally addressing issues of student attrition/retention by addressing barriers, the president of the school began moving forward on some emergent levers of actions. He requested that financial aid be increased for all students at the school and be made a greater priority. He made diversity, equity, and inclusion a major strategic priority of the school at the Board of Trustees level. This took place during his first year as President. In his second and third year, he requested an inventory of the school's financial aid office and business practices looking specifically at the financial aid eligibility software program that disseminated financial aid along with the offices' communication processes to families. The president personally oversaw a major reorganization of the entire leadership structure of the school. Offices were consolidated including the admissions office and the newly formed mission, ministry, and diversity office. Both offices along with the new Chief Financial Officer would set the stage for making student retention and successful persistence a priority as part of the President's Leadership Team and supported by the Principal. The president personally reached

out to families who had decided to withdraw from the school to learn of their reasons. The President and new Principal supported a previous strategic priority to revamp and expand the learning services and counseling offices to ensure students with various learning styles would have the structural resources in place to support them while also ensuring the mental health of all students, which was numbering over 1600.

Along with the principal, the president and the leadership team began a process of preliminary information gathering, dialogue, and data sharing to determine overall strategic planning for the school moving forward. As a result of this initial inventory and the bold move of removing real and perceived barriers for any student to attend the school becoming official and was approved by the Board of Trustees. It became quickly evident that several factors needed to be bought into this process unique to a nonprofit private Catholic Jesuit institution. Some of these factors included:

1. The school needed to determine a clear vision for setting its tuition price while at the same time ensuring a robust and resilient financial aid program for its students to provide greater accessibility to more students and families. Beginning in the 2018-2019 school year, the school would move towards the concept of an all-inclusive tuition model. This move came as result of gathering quantitative and qualitative data that concluded that along with the stated tuition sticker price, that families were paying an addition of 3000-4000.00\$ covering the costs of books, athletics, extracurriculars, testing, a technology device, etc. Based on these findings, the school decided to pursue an all-inclusive tuition price that would encompass as many of these costs as possible into the final tuition price. The cost of these extra aspects would be cheaper for the school to cover if spread among the entire student community and would allow for greater access and equitable in terms of a student's experience by removing these potential barriers. At the beginning of the new President's term the school allocated approximately 25% of the student body financial aid. The new President set the goal at 29%, which the school fell short of the first couple of years of his presidency. The President began to explore reasons for this pushing the goal up to one-third of the student body or 33%. Due to the Covid pandemic, staffing needs, reallocations of funds, and unprecedented times, the goal of 33% of the student population was achieve and surpassed consisting of over 6.3 million of student aid given and needed to be maintained for years after [8].
2. In addition, to the all-inclusive tuition cost setting piece, determining a strategy on being intentional of school's class profile would be also integral in the attrition and retention conversation. From 2010 or so, as the cultural diversity of the city was increasing the school made a concerted effort to increase the cultural diversity within its student body particularly as it pertained to race and

ethnicity. As a result, the cultural, gender, and learning style of diversity at the school had grown dramatically while retaining its Catholic identity remained the priority. These priorities in comprising class profile will continue. Another key aspect of the class profile that was added was to ensure gender equity in terms of student enrollment by 2026; this means that the same number of women and men will attend this school by this date. As of the inception of the girls building, the number of boys attending was always larger than girls. The cause of this goes back to the original feasibility study that forecasted that stated that the girls enrollment for the Catholic Jesuit high school would be about four hundred [4].

3. In addition, an instrument created and administered to all students by the Assistant Principal of Student Support to assess a student's sense of belonging or inclusion at the school began to be implemented during the 2021-2022 school year. This instrument would explore student attrition and retention from an affect perspective namely relationships with classmates and teachers looking at overall school culture. This instrument would supplement revamped student attrition reports created by the Assistant Principal of Academics and exit interviews that acquire feedback from students withdrawing administered by the Division Head of each building (girls and boys buildings, respectively).
4. A final phase of data gathering to achieve this bold move of removing barriers culminated with the Academic Principal of Academics reaching out to several its major feeder schools to determine areas of strength and potential gaps in terms of academic preparation and educational continuity when sending their students to this Catholic high school. The idea of focusing on feeder schools originated several years before when several faculty members created a program called the community partnership initiative (CPI). CPI sought to collaborate with middle schools to utilize some of the high school's resources, students, and personnel to collaborate with them on some areas of growth to prepare some of their students for a high school education at their Catholic school. Due to budget cuts and Covid Pandemic, this program had to be put on hold in 2020 due to Covid. This newer initiative led by the Assistant Principal of Academics supported by the Retention Coordinator ensured not solely focusing and singling out any student demographics thus risking deficit perspectives and the perpetuation of stereotypes and biases. But similar CPI, it provided partnership opportunities for the high school and the feeder schools in general to work together on elevating strengths within the high school assisting this schools in filling potential learning gaps quickly and intentionally when those students began at the High School.
5. Finally, the Assistant Principal of Mission, Ministry,

and Diversity as part of a reorganization of mission offices hired a fulltime Retention Coordinator that would be supervised by the Director of Diversity and Inclusion. This Retention Coordinator would also chair the newly formed Attrition Working Group and maintain regular data reports of student retention and attrition to be shared with key constituents of the school on a regular basis. This person would also work closely with both the Assistant Principals of Student Support and Academics along with the Faculty and Office of Admissions.

#### **4.1. Interview Data Results**

The Assistant Principal of MMD conducted with twelve faculty members. Real and perceived barriers referred to the obstacles or hindrances that student face in being successful at the high school they are admitted to. Examples of real barriers could involve areas of growth and challenge in terms of academics, but also could include factors such as geographic location, economic challenges, social capital, and cultural climate. Perceived barriers usually tend to focus on cultural climate issues some of which are real and perceived depending on the positionality of perspective and to what degree. Most of those interviewed struggled with the distinction made between real and perceived barriers. Almost all of them stated that a barrier that is perceived is in fact real as it encapsulates the reality of that student and their family's experience.

A majority of those interviewed stated that some ninth graders lack a strong sense of belonging to the Catholic school- something that is necessary right at the onset of their high school careers. A recommendation by some of the interview participants when meeting together was to consider an FAQs (frequently asked questions) sheet to provide timely information for rising ninth grade students on logistics such as transportation, finances, community activities, etc. continue to be a need for some families as there appears to be an increased need for these resources to be communicated repeatedly in a timely fashion to the entire community, but particularly for families in need. There needs to be consistent, multi-tiered, and innovative messaging by the school offices and staff, particularly those who work closely with ninth graders. This feedback led the Assistant Principal of Mission, Ministry, and Diversity to compose a list of first year communal experiences to be shared with the community as well as to request a review of all communication processes with the communication director of all first-year activities, programming, and academics.

Another barrier concluded by most of the interviewees was Catholic identity. Catholic identity or interpretation/perception of Catholic identity can serve both as a strength and a challenge of belonging and inclusion for some of our students and families. Given that the number of Catholic students at this Catholic school continues to decrease and given the emergent diversity of the school over the last 20 years or, many families need to adjust to the Catholic aspect of the school more deliberately; this includes

learning and adapting more to required Mass attendance and proper behavior, learning about the culture of daily Christian prayers that take place throughout the class day, Catholic values/teachings, Cultural artifacts throughout the building such as the stations of the cross and crucifixes in every classroom need to be explained as does simply what mandated theology classes are. All these aspects of Catholic identity can create class comradery with values consistent with unity and relationship-building. However, according to the interviewees, they can feel exclusive with those students new or unfamiliar with these Catholic experiences. Several interviewees, who were theology teachers stated that the school cannot assume that certain aspects of Catholic identity come intuitively for most of its students anymore; this includes those who declare themselves as Catholic. The school needs to form all ninth-grade classes of these Catholic norms at a baseline level without making any assumptions or having any expectations to offset feelings of not fitting in that can arise.

Another barrier that emerged in the interviewees was that due to the number and variety of feeder schools and emergent geographic diversity of the school's student body, many incoming ninth graders do not have friends from their schools coming to the Catholic high school. Many are the ones from their school attending the case study Catholic high school. It was recommended by most interviewees that all faculty in their classes, informal settings, and in other extracurriculars need to be extra intentional about grouping and regrouping ninth grade students; this is crucial in classrooms and in all student programming. It is imperative for new students to get to know each other and meet new people, groupings are essential to not only ninth grade classes, but all first-year experiences at this high school. The feedback from this interview group was that grouping and regrouping of students needs to be more intentional and innovative at this Catholic school.

Another barrier was the Catholic high school's sports and extracurriculars. They are crucial to student belonging and can be a barrier particularly due the emergent robustness and competitiveness of this school's athletic programs- something that is new to the school just a little over a decade old. While this robustness in our athletic programs is a blessing and enhances the overall brand of the school as a student draw, it is a potential challenge in student retention. Students who experience cuts to sports teams right at the onset of their ninth-grade year can prove detrimental for that student finding their place on campus and successfully persisting. The interviewees recommended a way to track students who are cut from certain sports or other extracurriculars to be quickly directed to other noncut sports or other clubs/activities more quickly.

The faculty interviewees posed some follow up questions that school needs to continue to discuss and address more intentionally in the future.

1. What is the diversity and accessibility of our learning services offices, and will this mission focus continue thus increasing the number of these students and

therefore the resources? How do we clearly publicize our programming in these areas while ensuring privacy and dignity of these families?

2. Are we honoring all our students as much as we can in the diversity of their achievements both inside and outside of the school?
3. How have we addressed the use of technology as it pertains to inclusion and belonging at this school?
4. How does the school plan to evaluate the concept of baselining or having all our ninth graders take the same classes in their first year at this school?
5. How does the school maintain and maximize the educational continuity of our rising ninth graders among admissions, academic, and student support throughout their admissions discernment, admittance, onboarding, and retention processes during their ninth-grade year?
6. Is the retention coordinator appropriately focused and being utilized?
7. How can we include faculty and student leaders that work primarily with ninth graders into this process?
8. How can we address our student culture in substantive, positive ways that are true to our Catholic, Jesuit values?
9. The case study school has already begun to address some of these questions, and this will be expanded on in the analysis that follows.

#### 4.2. Data Analysis

Historiography: Winds of Change and a Focus on Mission

Over the last forty years or so, this Case Study Catholic School has experienced tremendous cultural change, expansion, and growth. The initial change to relocate from the city to the suburbs was to ensure its long-term sustainability as a stable business. Separating from the college and increasing its student enrollment stabilized its business model and expanded its brand enabling it to focus on more ambitious, mission centered initiatives. These initiatives included having robust student mission programming in pastoral ministries, service immersion, and diversity/inclusion programs as graduation requirements thus prioritizing the formation of its students within its Catholic, Jesuit mission as integral to its education. These mission graduation requirements ensured not only an education that was academic, but robustly formational in nature at this case study school. It also ensured since many of these mission programs were graduation requirements that all students would have access to them. All of these programs consist of a CST vision that seeks to explore and ensure the human dignity of all human beings and the love of all neighbors. This continues today with the latest strategic move by the school's service immersion office to provide every senior a service immersion trip as a graduation requirement covered by the school.

This mission focus requires a heavy investment into mission by its faculty and leadership. All Faculty are contractually required to be invested in all the mission

programs of the school often deviating from their academic expertise area to do so. This has come to full fruition with the establishment of an Assistant Principal of Mission, Ministry, and Diversity who reports to both the President and the Principal and serve on both of their leadership teams. This Assistant Principal leads a Mission Team consisting of the mission directors of Pastoral, Service/Immersion, Staff Formation, and Diversity/Inclusion departments.

With growing student enrollment number, the CST mission focus of the school has caused it to increase resources and admission for its diverse, underrepresented students. This includes working with students with diverse, unique learning styles, creating a family liaison position in the diversity office for those families whose first language is not English, or creating a college counseling office for all its students, but targeting first generation college students. Like many schools, it has created resources such increasing financial aid as its own bus transportation to ensure geographic diversity for students that want to enroll at the school.

While all of these and other initiatives have made strong contributions to student enrollment and access, none were more consequential than the creation of a mechanism to educate young women in a single sex environment two decades ago. At the time of this writing, this remains the only Jesuit single sex education model provided solely for young women in the country. The inclusion of women is a major CST issue for the case study school. In addition to enhancing gender equity efforts at the school both structurally but also in terms of its mission, other aspects of diversity including the number of non-Catholic students, students from a much larger geographic radius, students with diverse learning styles/needs, more LGBTQIA students, students whose second language was English, and more fluid gender identities also began attending the Catholic school. While of these changes were welcome, they also challenged the Catholic, Jesuit mission identity of the school as well. Since the numbers of self-identified Catholic students have decreased at the school since the start of the century, a more diverse non-Catholic student body has emerged often creating consternation on the part of some Catholic constituents on how best to preserve the Catholic Ethos of the school. How can the case study Catholic School ensures being a diverse welcoming environment while ensuring it Catholic, Jesuit integrity? Is a certain quota number of Catholic faculty and students required? How will current student enrollment be sustained with such a quota given the decreasing number of Catholic students available? [9]. In the backdrop of this concern of Catholic identity, it is often unfairly placed on the school faculty and leadership, to take public stances or be misperceived as taking such stances on some of the cultural and political issues of the day, when in fact they were simply abiding by the values of mission of Catholic Social Teaching on racial justice, prolife, or workers' rights. This is also challenged by the mission statement of the school which calls for teaching students "how to think, not what to think". Parents, Students, Staff, and Parents alike expect school leaders to take a strong stand on issues

considering its emphasis on mission values; this often comes at the expense of antagonizing half of its constituents.

#### Interview Results: Real and Perceived Barriers

In response to the questions posed by the group of ninth grade faculty interviewed by the Assistant Principal of Mission, Ministry, and Diversity, the school leadership proceeded on the following actions.

1. The restructuring of the office of student retention is complete and the retention coordinator will chair the retention working group which began to meet in the spring of 2023. To ensure sufficient support and resources for the number of students, the retention coordinator and office will need ongoing feedback from this attrition working group.
2. The school newspaper and weekly online show has done a profile feature of certain ninth graders or teachers. Along with the yearbook and school newspaper, the school will need to look for more creative ways via the communications and newly formed marketing office through commendations, student profiles, or regularly updated cultural artifacts to honor and recognize our students for a diversity of achievements.
3. Ninth grade teachers along with counselors are in the position of being that bridge for the ninth graders and their school experience- this includes discussing behavior at Masses, appropriate behavior in terms of the school's culture, resources, logistics of events that are solely for ninth graders and their families- nuts/bolts orientation, ninth grade retreat, first home football game run in, etc. Ninth grade teachers and counselors will be included in all these messages so they are aware and can share in "real time" with ninth graders and their families.
4. It has become evident that school policies alone cannot address the school culture, which is characterized by informal, unstructured settings like the hallways, locker rooms, cafeterias, and passing periods in between classes. Presence in the hallways by staff and upper-class student leaders is integral to ninth graders feeling safe and a sense of belonging, which shapes school culture. This was a hallmark of this school until Covid arrived and it has taken time for the school to revert to back to the strong staff presence in those liminal spaces outside of the classroom. In addition to increasing staff presence in the hallways, there is a staff training and enrichment regarding microaggressions, which began in the summer of 2022 in the context of the Catholic, Jesuit mission of the school to build healthy relationships. In addition to staff training on microaggressions, the school decided it to move its ninth-grade retreat closer to the start of the school year linking it to all student orientation programs to retain students, build class unity, and a sense of belonging. All of the student first year activities will fall under the pastoral ministries office to ensure formation in the spirit of the school's Catholic Jesuit mission.

5. To ensure educational continuity for rising eighth graders throughout their admissions, onboarding, and ninth grade year, it is essential that there be consistent messaging from the offices of admissions, academics, student support, and Mission from seventh grade through the start of their ninth-grade year at the case study school. This involves academic, mission graduation requirements, student support resources in terms of mental health, athletic/extracurricular opportunities, school culture, Catholic, Jesuit identity, college planning, and diverse learning styles to allow students to make an informed decision whether they can fully thrive at this school. Creating a working group as recommended in this study would contribute to maintaining this educational continuity. As mentioned, it is also imperative that the school communicates repeatedly in a diversity of platforms all this information to incoming students in a timely fashion.
6. The office of student support along with the Assistant Principal of Student Support implementing an annual student survey of belonging created a program called sources of strength overseen by the counseling office working to train students to embark of a peer-to-peer training and support.
7. Since the number of enrolled students is coming from more feeder schools, the need to ensure all of them reach a certain level of baselining learning during their ninth-grade year. At this school, this involves ninth graders taking the same class in a variety of subjects including English, Geography, and Theology. The goal of baselining is to provide greater access and equitable preparation for all ninth-grade students to prepare more of them for Advanced Placement and Honors classes the rest of the high school academic career. Data gathering is taking place to assess the progress of baselining particularly in the English department supported by the Academic Assistant Principal. It will take, but it is important to assess whether this baselining is providing students enough options and opportunities for further enrichment after their ninth-grade year and if more of them are more prepared.
8. The all-inclusive tuition model adopted by the school has improved access to technology by covering the cost of a technical device, but it cannot ensure internet access at home or outside of school hours. In terms of proper use of this device, an annual presentation made by lawyers regarding the legal implications of illegal use of social media is now formally part of ninth grade formation and is sponsored by the office of student support. The school also has in the past bought in an organization to do a training on issues of sexual harassment, assault and violence. Both are mandatory for ninth graders to attend. The school needs to work on having uniform policies that regulate the use of tech devices in the institution in certain spaces, in classrooms and adding potential counseling/therapy

resources in place for addiction to aspects of technology.

#### **4.3. Data Analysis Models**

In determining data analysis models for the school, it was essential that key constituents of the school determine an agreed upon understanding of key concepts of student attrition, data metrics, messaging, and other institutional factors related to student attrition, retention, and successful persistence. Establishing a working group that co-creates a philosophy of successful student persistence, regularly studies student attrition, and collectively monitors the progress of successful retention efforts on a regular basis is essential. This working group, overseen by the retention coordinator, will meet at least quarterly to analyze the incoming enrollment processes, attrition data, and current retention/student support efforts in the context of mission focus. The retention coordinator on behalf of this working group would report regular findings to the President and Principal. The working group includes representatives from the office of admissions, diversity/inclusion, business office, student support, and academics.

In terms of data analysis models and processes, several metrics could be considered by the school leadership and their efficacy in determining an accurate picture of the school's retention and successful persistence efforts. This includes looking at the annual attrition rate, the matriculation attrition rate of a particular graduating class throughout their four years at the school, and perhaps most importantly, assessing the case study school's current attrition rate over a 4-year period, which currently is around 10%. Also continuing to supplement the macro data analysis piece with case-by-case data provides an important rich textured description of the student experience. It supplements the quantitative data by delving into the deeper complexities of why a student is successfully retained and successfully persists at the school. Finally, a set of baseline data that is longitudinal in nature studying the school's student attrition tied to certain demographic variables (such as gender, SES, or race) while controlling for other variables (such as net student numbers, matriculation rates and yields for example) is essential. Comparing this data to the surrounding educational context in which the case study school exists could prove helpful to a point (state, local district, Catholic, Jesuit enrollment and attrition data, etc.), but the school needs to determine their own unique way of proceeding. The Case Study School can compare grade level enrollment numbers in a four-year span with other comparable Jesuit high schools or independent schools. They could regularly gather, compare, and share data in terms of tuition costs, financial aid, diversity, and enrollment numbers.

#### **A Need for Mission Focus to Drive Student Class Profile**

This increase in the student enrollment caused a greater demand in terms of resources, personnel, and mission questions to ensure the thriving of all these students. DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) in all its many forms and manifestations continued to be inherent to the Catholic

mission of the school, but with tension and complexity. This tension has been addressed by enhancing it Catholic, Jesuit identity through additional mission programming in the form of retreats, service immersion opportunities, and formational activities outside of the classroom. While these DEI issues as well as Catholic identity/ formational aspects continue as part of the mission focus of the school, external factors such as the decrease of enrollment numbers in the local Catholic elementary schools, the lack of growth in Catholic high schools in the area, and the continuing priority of the school to expand its facilities also contributes. Quite simply put, the case study school cannot be all things to all people. It must be faithful and transparent when it comes to its mission focuses and admit (and at times do not admit) students cognizant of these focuses. For example, beginning a decade ago both the cultural diversity of the school and along with the diverse learning styles were emphasized as key priorities for admission of students. Consequently, programs, personnel, and resources in both the diversity and learning needs offices increased. During this current school campaign along with removing barriers for students, a science and innovation building will be built strategically seeking to enhance the role of women in the math and science fields. In addition, in continuing to pursue gender equity efforts, the student enrollment of young men and young women grade level will be more balanced moving forward. The key is to be prudent and disciplined in admitting students mindful of the school's current mission focus. Moving towards a rough class profile of an incoming class would go a long way to maintaining this mission focus in the admissions process while also ensure the successful persistence of all its students who are aware of the type of school they are entering.

#### *Implications*

All the major changes within the history of the school calls for ongoing formation of its staff and students per the mission statement. This formation must involve a thorough knowledge of the history presented here accompanied by the Catholic Jesuit mission aspects that spurred the school's historical milestones. A formation that is hopefully looking to the future in its aspiration towards the mission cognizant of the challenges and potential constraints and deeply spiritual. While the history of the school is to be celebrated as well as communally reflected on, it must always look to the future. This formation must be mission focused and involving the entire community together discerning what lies ahead and making choices that are prudent, mission focused, and involve guardrails as to avoid mission creep. Mission creep often involves institutions like this case study school lacking disciplined guardrails endeavoring to be all things to all people being institutionally excessive rather than seeking excellence in certain areas. Issues of student admission, attrition, retention, and successful persistence need to be considered in this mission focused context and in the spirit of Jesuit discernment. The hope is the attrition working group would lead the community in this discernment while helping define terms of student attrition, retention, and successful student persistence in the context of academic requirements,

student support, and student culture with greater depth and precision. How this attrition working group, school leadership, and key community constituents proceed in this discernment needs to be catalogued, chronicled, and shared with the community for future formation of its community and for other schools.

This case study Catholic school could include a deeper exploration of resource allocation. Specifically, looking at what are the specific timely resources needed for successful retention and persistence and how is the school distributing the current resources equitably and for maximum effect. Another topic for future research would be to not only explore ninth grade attrition and retention efforts, but focusing in on other factors or variables such as grade levels, transfer students, or considering attrition/retention, and successful persistence honing on a particular demographic.

Finally, it is essential that the institutional school expectations for all its students and the students' own expectations of achievement at the school are as convergent as possible. This is a key and complex aspect in both successful student retention and persistence, particularly among underrepresented communities and begins in the admission process. Schools need to ensure that all their students aspire for the highest expectations cognizant of potential biases and minimizing problematic deficit perspectives. These issues must be addressed to minimize divergence between the students' own expectations and the case study school. These are CST issues. Issues of bias, perception, sense of entitlement, and prejudice can intervene creating a discrepancy between the expectations a student has for themselves versus what the school appears to have for that student. In recent years, the case study school has incorporated a robust culturally responsive teaching techniques for staff, ensuring that all students acquire the same opportunities and access within the school through the all-inclusive tuition model, and creating a positive learning environment for all students to flourish to the best of their abilities exploring the concept of belonging. All of these efforts must continue and be innovative to minimize any real or perceived barriers in the process whether financial, geographic, cultural, etc. Furthermore, the highest expectations for a student involves not just academics, but equitable access to extracurriculars, leadership opportunities, and their postsecondary experiences and prospects. The case study school has made tremendous strides in this area continually examining bias, having consistent selection committees/processes for prestigious student awards/opportunities, and being transparent about these processes with the community. The case study school continues to discern whether to widely distribute opportunities to as many students as possible or whether to assume that only a few students have the capacity for leadership. It is the opinion of this author that student opportunities are formational in themselves and should serve to form the students as well as serve and form the entire community. Furthermore, more students than not possess this capacity for leadership excellence and that it should be

cultivated as part of their educational experience at the school.

## 5. Conclusion

Key aspects of student attrition, retention, and successful student persistence at this Catholic case study school were reported along with its strategic approach was described in depth. When looking forward it is important to look back. The history of the school can identify and pinpoint long standing assumptions and interpretation of mission values that led to past specific institutional action steps. Knowledge of these past steps should be considered in addressing certain current issues of student enrollment, retention, and persistence. In terms of the data gathering models and sources of data on attrition/retention, the data is available, but must be collectively analyzed and honestly discussed regularly. The major challenges to this include determining what these raw data numbers actually mean and their reliability specific to the institution within its unique context. Each school needs to determine its own model for data analysis. Looking at other comparable high school data and data models is a good first step, but the schools themselves need to determine what the data means. Once reliability and statistical significance is collectively established and agreed upon, it is imperative that conclusions be drawn accompanied by action steps from the data analysis. All of which needs to be regularly monitored and reassessed in a transparent way. Schools have become adept at collecting data and sharing it, but ongoing transparent data analysis, specific action steps, and follow up assessment can be challenging. The goal of removing real and perceived barriers must be sustainable over time. Ultimately, it is the community constituents that will hold the school accountable to these strategies.

Finally, for this case study Catholic school, it is the mission that serves as the tie that binds. The mission of this case study school is driven by forming student to think for themselves critically and the aspects of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Mission focus informs all aspects of the school interweaving with student admission/enrollment, academics, extracurricular and programming all in pursuit of mission conveyance. All these components of the school all contribute to key issues of student attrition, informs/animates student retention efforts, and determines what successful student persistence truly encompasses. In removing real and perceived barriers for any student, this case study Catholic high school wants to ensure that any young man or woman who desires the full educational experience of the school has access to all of it. An institution needs to determine for themselves based on the values of their mission their institutional strategic goals as it pertains to student admissions, retention, and persistence metrics. If done thoroughly and honestly, the institution will inevitably face mission questions, implications, and difficult decisions. Student retention and attrition efforts will be affected by the mission focus of the school, which comes with greater emphasis towards achieving certain initiatives i. e., mission

focuses for a period of time. Schools with a robust, resilient mission must choose its focus. Refusing to acknowledge this reality can cause the school to try to be all things to everyone resulting in a form of mission creep, where the school is mediocre focusing on too many areas of mission without a disciplined focus. Mission that is excessive comes at the expense of excellence. The Catholic, Jesuit mission and its mission focus informs and connects to aspects of student admissions/enrollment, academic, attrition/retention, and mission programming. Mission is and should be the tie that binds strategic student attrition, retention, and successful persistence efforts of a school.

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