

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENT RETENTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS



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ABSTRACT

This article analyzed the strategies implemented to improve student retention in higher education institutions, with the main objective of identifying and evaluating the factors that influenced the continuity of studies. The theme addressed the complexity of the phenomena of dropout and retention, highlighting the challenges faced by universities to promote an inclusive educational environment conducive to academic development. The research adopted a bibliographic methodology, in which articles, books, theses, dissertations, conference proceedings and online publications were collected and analyzed, allowing the systematization of existing knowledge on the subject. Steps were followed that included the identification of the theme, the careful selection of sources through the CAPES Periodicals database, and the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria based on the relevance and timeliness of the publications. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively, which made it possible to integrate the findings and compare different studies and theoretical approaches. The results indicated that the implementation of active methodologies, support policies and improvements in infrastructure contributed significantly to the reduction of dropout rates and the strengthening of institutional links, and it was concluded that the combination of interconnected actions promoted the permanence of students, demonstrating the effectiveness of an integrated approach. These findings supported the discussion and helped in the formulation of practical proposals for the improvement of the educational scenario, providing a critical view of the practices adopted.

Keywords: Persistence. Evasion. Innovation. Integration. Retention.

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INTRODUCTION

The retention of students in higher education institutions assumes increasing relevance in the current educational scenario, since the continuity of studies is influenced by academic, socioeconomic and institutional factors. The general objective is to improve student retention strategies, while the specific objectives include the analysis of the determinant factors of dropout and permanence, the identification and evaluation of the intervention strategies adopted by the institutions and the proposition of guidelines for the consolidation of an inclusive and sustainable educational environment. The guiding question that guides the research is: 'how can the strategies implemented contribute to the improvement of student retention in higher education institutions?'

The research uses a bibliographic approach, based on scientific studies and theoretical references, as proposed by Santana, Narciso and Fernandes (2025) in "Exploring scientific methodologies: types of research, approaches and practical applications". Data are collected systematically through literature analysis in specialized databases, and the analysis technique used is qualitative analysis, which allows critical interpretation and integration of findings with theoretical references.

The structure of the work presents subsections that develop, in an articulated way, the topics 'Characteristics and Challenges in Understanding Dropout and Retention in Higher Education', 'Determining Factors Influencing Student Retention', 'Strategies for Student Retention', 'Observations and Suggestions from a Case Study on Retention'. Therefore, the investigation establishes a systematic overview of issues related to student retention, demonstrating that the integration of innovative strategies, support policies and inclusive practices is fundamental for the promotion of an educational environment that favors the continuity of studies.

METHODOLOGY

In the present research, a bibliographic methodological approach was adopted, according to the precepts established by Santana, Narciso and Fernandes (2025) in "Exploring scientific methodologies: types of research, approaches and practical applications", which consisted of the collection and analysis of materials that included articles, books, theses, dissertations, conference proceedings and pages of specialized websites, with the objective of gathering information that supported the solution of the research problem. The methodological process involved sequential stages, and the theme

was first identified, followed by the search and selection of sources, the critical analysis of the materials and, finally, the organization of bibliographic references.

The instruments and procedures used consisted of the use of the 'CAPES Periódicos' database, a platform that provided access to high-quality scientific journals, as well as other specialized databases, in order to ensure the relevance and timeliness of the selected studies.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria adopted restricted the selection to publications from 2015 onwards, which were directly pertinent to the theme of student retention in higher education institutions, while studies that did not meet these criteria were systematically excluded. The keywords used in the research were 'higher education', 'retention', 'strategies' and 'inclusion', which allowed to delimit the search and guide the analysis of the data collected.

CHARACTERISTICS AND CHALLENGES IN UNDERSTANDING DROPOUT AND RETENTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Initially, dropout is characterized as the phenomenon by which students interrupt their academic trajectory before completing the course, which manifests itself at different stages of education. Such disruption can be attributed to personal factors, such as financial difficulties and health problems, as well as deficiencies in the structure and organization of institutions. In this way, dropout is not restricted to a simple individual decision, but reflects a set of circumstances that affect the dynamics of higher education. Furthermore, the complexity of the phenomenon highlights the existence of interrelated barriers, such as the inadequacy of teaching methods, the insufficiency of psychopedagogical support and adverse socioeconomic conditions, thus contributing to the discontinuity of studies (Lammers; Saints; Toassi, 2019, p.8).

In addition, retention represents the set of actions and strategies implemented by institutions with the objective of keeping students in their courses. However, this process involves the development and execution of follow-up policies that consider both the academic and social aspects of the students. In this way, retention includes offering academic monitoring programs, creating mentoring services, and promoting an environment that makes it easier for students to adapt to the demands of higher education. Furthermore, the effectiveness of retention initiatives is directly linked to the ability of

institutions to identify and intervene early in the factors that can trigger dropout, through preventive strategies aimed at maintaining enrollment (Guimarães *et al.*, 2019, p.9).

Consequently, the analysis of the two phenomena – dropout and retention – reveals that both have interdependent characteristics and require an approach that contemplates the multiple levels of institutional action. On the other hand, while dropout denotes the sum of challenges and obstacles that lead the student to drop out of the course, retention is configured as the strategic response that aims to minimize these risks. In this way, it is imperative that institutions develop and implement continuous support mechanisms, which not only monitor the academic performance of students, but also consider their emotional and social needs.

In addition, international studies show that, despite contextual variations, the factors that drive dropout and influence retention have convergent points. Thus, the understanding of these processes involves the analysis of data that show the influence of the institutional environment, available resources and support policies on the continuity of studies. Thus, the integration between monitoring practices, the provision of guidance services and investment in pedagogical infrastructure are essential to create an environment conducive to the permanence of students.

Furthermore, it is observed that the promotion of an academic environment that favors retention requires the implementation of articulated and intersectoral actions. Therefore, coordination between administrative and pedagogical sectors is essential to develop programs that follow the trajectory of students and identify signs of vulnerability early. In this way, retention strategies not only minimize dropout rates, but also contribute to the consolidation of a more robust academic education in line with contemporary demands.

Thus, the discussion about dropout and retention in higher education shows that coping with this phenomenon requires the integration of actions that contemplate the academic, emotional and social aspects of students. Thus, through an approach that combines critical analysis of data, implementation of support policies, and articulation between different institutional sectors, it is possible to reduce dropout rates and promote an educational environment that favors the success and continuity of studies.

DETERMINING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE STUDENT RETENTION

Understanding the factors that affect student retention requires a detailed analysis of the socioeconomic context, which is a determining element in the configuration of the

university environment. In this sense, the differences in the socioeconomic reality require managers to rethink the policies to support the permanence and completion of the courses, in order to meet the needs of a heterogeneous student population. Variations in students' living conditions can indirectly impact their ability to adapt to the pace and academic demands, imposing additional challenges that go beyond academic performance. This perspective is corroborated by studies that highlight the need for an institutional approach sensitive to these disparities, as indicated, for example, when it is stated that:

The coexistence of different socioeconomic realities requires attention from university managers in terms of rethinking institutional policies to support permanence and completion (Máximo *et al.*, 2024, n.p)

However, the challenges to student retention are not restricted to socioeconomic issues. Other factors intrinsic to the training process, such as academic preparation and mechanisms of social and academic integration, also play a relevant role. In this context, the ability of institutions to offer adequate pedagogical support and promote the insertion of students in the university environment is essential to mitigate the risk of dropout. Evidence indicates that, in addition to prior preparation, the strengthening of bonds and the development of a solid commitment to educational objectives significantly influence the continuity of studies. This relationship is reinforced by studies that suggest that "retention rates include academic preparation, social integration, academic integration, commitment to the institution, commitment to the objective, environment and demographic characteristics" (Costa; Gouveia, 2018, p. 172)

In addition, the integration of academic and social aspects in the university environment is crucial to reduce dropout. When students feel part of an academic community, the feeling of belonging intensifies, promoting the continuity of studies and engagement with institutional activities. This integration process, when stimulated through follow-up programs and activities that encourage interaction, creates favorable conditions for overcoming obstacles that can lead to abandonment. Studies indicate that the effectiveness of this integration is directly proportional to the robustness of the commitments signed between the student and the institution, as demonstrated in the following statement: "Academic and social integration is fundamental to reduce the risk of dropout, and the stronger these commitments, the lower the probability of dropping out" (Costa; Gouveia, 2018, p. 168)

On the other hand, innovation in teaching emerges as a strategic element capable of enhancing student commitment. The introduction of active methodologies and innovative pedagogical resources can transform the educational environment, making it more dynamic and attractive. In this way, innovation not only enriches the teaching-learning process, but also acts as a stimulus for students to stay, reinforcing the bond with the institution. This perspective is supported by studies that emphasize the transformative role of innovation in strengthening academic engagement "Innovation in teaching can lead to student engagement and retention" (Guimarães *et al.*, 2019, p. 254).

Finally, the permanence of students, understood as the maintenance of the academic bond, represents the final objective of retention policies. This concept encompasses not only the continuity of studies, but also the consolidation of a lasting relationship between the student and the institution. Thus, for retention strategies to be effective, it is necessary to create an environment conducive to academic and personal development, integrating actions that meet the demands of both the social environment and the academic universe. As highlighted in some studies, the maintenance of this bond is a crucial indicator of the effectiveness of institutional policies to "permanence, which represents the maintenance of the academic bond" (Máximo *et al.*, 2024, n.p)

Consequently, the analysis of the factors influencing student retention demonstrates that an integrated and complex approach is indispensable to address the challenges of higher education. In summary, by combining the analysis of socioeconomic conditions, the strengthening of institutional bonds, and the promotion of innovative practices, institutions can build a more inclusive educational environment that is conducive to the continuity of studies. Thus, university managers have the responsibility to articulate these dimensions in a cohesive way, promoting actions aimed at reducing dropout and consolidating students' commitment to their academic trajectory.

STRATEGIES FOR STUDENT RETENTION

The analysis of strategies aimed at student retention reveals that innovations in higher education, expressed through active learning methodologies, contribute to quality and commitment, in this way educational institutions can obtain the permanence of students (Guimarães *et al.*, 2019), a fact that demonstrates the importance of incorporating modern and interactive pedagogical practices. In this way, by investing in learning environments that encourage the active participation of students, institutions raise not only

the quality of teaching, but also strengthen the bond of students with the HEI (Higher Education Institution), which, in turn, has repercussions on the consolidation and leverage in the market, since "quality is a factor of consolidation and leverage in the market, that improves the image and reputation of the HEI, and influences the student's commitment, and their permanence in the HEI" (Guimarães *et al.*, 2019, p. 253).

In addition, it is essential that educational institutions adopt complementary strategies, such as the offer of student scholarships, monitoring and extra-class care, which are configured as efficient mechanisms to reduce dismissals and, consequently, to contribute to student retention, as pointed out by Máximo *et al.* (2024, n.p)

[...] The offer of student scholarships, monitoring and extra-class care are strategies that, when implemented, can reduce the frequency of dismissals and contribute to student retention.

This approach, by favoring access and permanence, evidences the commitment of institutions to provide conditions that go beyond traditional education, seeking to meet the financial and pedagogical needs of students. In this way, universities show interest in developing integrated policies that consider the complexity of the student profile, while expanding training opportunities through economic support and diversified teaching methodologies. In addition, the creation of specific academic aid and guidance programs reinforces the importance of offering an infrastructure that promotes not only academic performance, but also the overcoming of socioeconomic challenges that may compromise the continuity of studies. Consequently, the integration of these initiatives contributes to the formation of a more inclusive educational environment, where students find adequate conditions to face the demands of higher education and develop their full potential.

On the other hand, the implementation of affirmative action policies, such as the Quota Law, has proven to be fundamental in modifying the determinants for dropout, since such measures promote inclusion and expand the possibilities of academic permanence, demonstrating that

[...] the implementation of affirmative action policies, such as the Quota Law, has modified the determinants for dropout, highlighting the importance of strategies that promote inclusion and, consequently, academic permanence (Máximo *et al.*, 2024, n.p).

Thus, inclusion is established as a central axis for the creation of more equitable and welcoming educational environments, which contribute to the reduction of dropout rates. In this sense, the promotion of inclusive policies and practices allows for the expansion of access to resources and opportunities, favoring the integration of students from different socioeconomic and cultural profiles. By establishing support mechanisms that meet the specific demands of each group, institutions strengthen students' sense of belonging and motivation, creating an environment in which everyone feels valued and encouraged to continue their studies. Consequently, implementing strategies that prioritize diversity and equal opportunities not only improves academic performance but also reduces barriers that might otherwise lead to dropping out of courses.

In addition, the need to rethink the financial management of universities is another determining factor for the effectiveness of pedagogical projects aimed at the academic success of students, a fact evidenced in the statement that "among the strategies pointed out, the need to rethink the financial management of universities stands out, optimizing resources and investing in pedagogical projects that facilitate the academic success of students" (Máximo *et al.*, 2024, n.p). In this way, the strategic allocation of resources becomes indispensable for the implementation of initiatives that ensure the continuity of studies, enabling the institution to create an environment conducive to the integral development of students.

Finally, it is essential that retention strategies consider not only the financial aspects, but also the socioeconomic conditions of the students, in order to create an environment of inclusion and academic continuity, as emphasized in the statement that "retention strategies must consider not only the financial aspects, but also the socioeconomic conditions of the students, in order to create an environment of inclusion and academic continuity" (Máximo *et al.*, 2024, n.p). Consequently, by integrating pedagogical innovations, financial support mechanisms, and inclusive policies, higher education institutions establish a comprehensive approach that enhances student retention and strengthens the academic trajectory, showing that student retention depends on the harmonious articulation of multiple interconnected strategies.

OBSERVATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FROM A CASE STUDY ON RETENTION

At first, the case study reveals the complexity of the meanings attributed to retention and dropout, evidencing the emergence of categories that encompass the arrival and

adaptation to university, the work-study conciliation, classroom experiences, learning assessment and the role of the institution in the permanence of students, as observed in

[...] five categories of retention and dropout meanings emerged: arrival and adaptation to university, work-study balance, classroom experiences, learning assessment and the role of the educational institution in the permanence of students (Lamers; Saints; Toassi, 2017, p. 1)

Thus, the analysis of the case substantiates the need for actions that integrate these various aspects to promote academic continuity. In addition, the suggestions pointed out by the study highlight the importance of organizational and academic measures that favor student retention. For example, the semester offer of mandatory courses and the adequacy of the organization and distribution of course schedules in the weekly workload are strategies that aim to optimize the academic experience, as evidenced by Lamers, Santos and Toassi (2017). Consequently, these measures seek to align the curricular structure with the needs of students, contributing to a better organization of time and, consequently, to the reduction of dropout rates.

On the other hand, the integration between the night and day courses, as well as the expansion of participation in academic activities, is also a crucial point for retention, which is reflected in the recommendation of "Greater integration of the night course with the day course and with the academic activities of the university" (Lamers; Saints; Toassi, 2017, p. 22). In addition, the study suggests that improvements in the physical space, pointed out as essential by both students and teachers, should be considered to create an environment more conducive to permanence (Lamers; Saints; Toassi, 2017). In this way, the integration of pedagogical measures with improvements in infrastructure evidences a systemic approach to address retention challenges.

In addition, the authors emphasize that the "findings of this research signal the need for shared actions between managers, teachers and students that promote the permanence of students" (Lamers; Saints; Toassi, 2017, p. 22). In parallel, the performance of complementary academic activities was cited as "enriching training and facilitating permanence in the course." (Lamers; Saints; Toassi, 2017, p. 21). However, it is important to emphasize that the lack of time for participation and the reduced number of activities offered at night were pointed out as obstacles, and are directly highlighted in the statements of the interviewees (Lamers; Saints; Toassi, 2017).

In addition, it is recommended that the offer of activities aimed at research and extension be expanded to include students in the evening course, either during regular class hours or on Saturdays, which is reinforced by the observation that

In this sense, students and professors recommend that the offer of activities aimed at research and extension can also include students in the night course during the hours they are in college or on Saturdays (Lamers; Saints; Toassi, 2017, p. 21).

In this way, the diversification of extracurricular activities emerges as a complementary strategy that can enrich the education of students and encourage their permanence. In addition, by offering varied opportunities that go beyond the conventional curriculum, institutions allow students to explore diverse interests, improve practical skills, and develop socio-emotional skills essential for their academic trajectory. Consequently, participation in workshops, extension projects, seminars, and other initiatives contributes to strengthening the bonds between students and the institution, promoting a more interactive and collaborative learning environment. In addition, this approach encourages student protagonism, favoring the construction of a network of relationships that enriches both the academic experience and personal training, which, in turn, is reflected in the improvement of retention rates.

Finally, the study also associates the permanence of students with aspects related to the physical structure and functioning of night courses, as well as the institution itself, according to the authors

The permanence in the course was also associated by students and professors with aspects related to the physical structure and the functioning of the night course and the School of Dentistry as a whole, such as the extension of the opening hours of the library, the academic directory and the cafeteria (Lamers; Saints; Toassi, 2017, p. 22).

Consequently, the observations and suggestions extracted from the case study demonstrate that the combination of improvements in the curricular organization, in the integration of courses and in the infrastructure conditions, together with the expansion of academic and extension activities, configures a set of interconnected and essential strategies for the promotion of student retention. In this way, this integration of measures fosters the creation of an environment conducive to strengthening the bond between students and the institution, allowing challenges related to adaptation and academic development to be faced more effectively.

In addition, by optimizing the curricular organization, institutions provide a more coherent educational experience aligned with contemporary demands, which contributes to the construction of successful trajectories and the continuity of studies. At the same time, the improvement of infrastructure conditions, both physical and technological, reflects the commitment to the well-being and motivation of students, fundamental elements for the consolidation of quality education. In addition, the expansion of academic and extension activities promotes interaction between professors, students, and the community, strengthening the culture of collaboration and expanding opportunities for practical learning. In this way, the adoption of a comprehensive and collaborative approach in educational management is essential to integrate these actions and, thus, reduce dropout rates, consolidating the institutional commitment to the permanence of students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The main conclusions of the study reveal that the strategies to improve student retention in higher education institutions are based on an integrated approach that ranges from the reorganization of the curricular structure and the improvement of infrastructure conditions to the expansion of academic and extension activities. These findings indicate that the implementation of active methodologies, financial support, and inclusive policies play a decisive role in promoting student permanence, showing that coordinated interventions can contribute significantly to reducing dropout rates (Lamers; Saints; Toassi, 2017).

In addition, the significance of these findings lies in the realization that retention is a multifactorial phenomenon, requiring the articulation of different institutional dimensions. In this way, the strategies adopted are not restricted to isolated changes, but reflect a comprehensive commitment to improving the quality of teaching and strengthening the bonds between students and institutions. In line with this perspective, pedagogical innovation and the offer of economic and academic support collaborate to consolidate more inclusive and dynamic educational environments, reinforcing the idea that the permanence of students depends on the integration of various actions (Máximo *et al.*, 2024).

Furthermore, these findings establish a consistent dialogue with previous studies, which point to the relevance of the integration between curricular and extracurricular activities in promoting student engagement. For example, the evidence presented by Guimarães *et al.* (2019) corroborate the importance of using active methodologies and

institutional support to strengthen the academic experience, demonstrating that the effectiveness of retention strategies depends on the harmony between the various practices adopted by institutions. Thus, the results of the present study converge with the existing literature, reinforcing the need for multidimensional approaches to address the challenges of dropout and retention.

On the other hand, the limitations of the findings must be recognized from a critical analysis and based on bibliographic references. It is observed that the scope of the data collected and the specificity of the context studied may restrict the generalization of the results to other educational environments. Thus, indirectly, the limitations pointed out suggest that the variability of contexts and the multiplicity of factors involved in retention require caution in the interpretation of the findings, as suggested by studies that advocate the expansion of databases and the use of diversified methodologies for an evaluation.

In addition, some results presented surprising or inconclusive characteristics, especially with regard to the integration between night and day courses and the effectiveness of certain extracurricular activities. This inconsistency can be explained, according to the bibliography, by the complexity inherent in measuring the impacts of innovative pedagogical practices in various contexts, which reinforces the need to adopt multiple evaluation indicators to capture the totality of the effects (Lamers; Saints; Toassi, 2017). Thus, the findings, although relevant, should be considered as part of a panorama under construction, which requires complementary analyses for a complete understanding of the retention and dropout phenomena.

Finally, the study suggests that future research should broaden the scope of the investigation to include other contexts and indicators, aiming to validate and deepen the strategies identified. It is recommended that longitudinal and comparative studies be carried out that allow a more comprehensive and detailed analysis of the factors that influence the permanence of students. Thus, the continuity of research in the area is indispensable for the improvement of institutional practices and for the consolidation of an increasingly inclusive educational environment, capable of responding to the contemporary challenges of higher education.

CONCLUSION

The study allowed us to answer the questions raised at the beginning of the work, as exposed in the introduction and in the methodology, by demonstrating that the strategies to

improve student retention in higher education institutions proved to be effective when integrating actions that contemplated academic, socioeconomic and institutional aspects. It was evidenced that the active methodologies, the curricular restructuring and the financial and academic support implemented contributed to the reduction of dropout rates and to the strengthening of the bonds between students and institutions.

The objectives of the research were achieved, since it was proven that the adoption of innovative pedagogical practices and inclusive policies promoted the permanence of students. The central purposes of the investigation – to improve the quality of teaching, integrate different dimensions of the educational environment and offer conditions that meet the needs of students – were met and supported by the data collected, which revealed a positive trend in the consolidation of the academic bond and in the continuity of studies.

In addition, the present study left notes that served as a basis for future research, highlighting the need to deepen the analysis of the factors that influence retention and to broaden the scope of the investigation to various contexts. Longitudinal and comparative studies were recommended to enable the identification of additional indicators and the verification of the effectiveness of the strategies adopted, contributing to the consolidation of an increasingly inclusive educational environment aligned with the contemporary demands of higher education.

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