



Retention: Does it Really Matter?

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The Commission on Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs (CAAHEP) accreditation is outcomes oriented. Standard IV.B.1 (Outcomes Assessment) defines the minimum outcomes that must be measured and tracked by accredited Paramedic programs. Each year, programs report their outcomes results to CoAEMSP in the online Annual Report. For each outcome, the Committee on Accreditation of Educational Programs for the Emergency Medical Services Professions (CoAEMSP) has defined thresholds (minimum percentages) that must be met by programs. The purpose of thresholds is to guide programs and CoAEMSP in monitoring these measures of the effectiveness of the program in meeting its goals and learning domains. The annual reports are an integral part of the accreditation process, in addition to the comprehensive reviews (i.e., self study report, site visit) that occur every 5 years.

CAAHEP accredited Paramedic programs are required to meet identified thresholds in the outcome areas of: Written National or State credentialing examinations; Programmatic Retention (exit point completion); Graduate Satisfaction; Employer Satisfaction; and Job (Positive) Placement. These data are part of the information programs submit each year in the Annual Report (AR). In 2013, the CoAEMSP began a phased-in, systematic review of specified outcomes and began a dialogue with the programs that fall below the identified outcome threshold, using a rolling three year reporting period. The dialogue consists of additional analysis and action plan in the form of a Standardized Progress Report (SPR), after the results of the ARs have been compiled and reviewed by the CoAEMSP Quality Improvement (QI) Committee.

The first outcome tackled by the CoAEMSP QI Committee was the Written National or State credentialing examination pass rates. While certification examinations are viewed as a “gold standard”, it is still only one measure of success, however these rates are an important indicator.

The second outcome, added for review in 2013, was retention. For this reporting/analysis period, 81% of reporting programs met the 70% retention threshold. The range for retention for programs not meeting this threshold was 38% to 69% with an approximate 50% average. Reasons for student attrition are multiple and varied. Also, in some programs student enrollment/cohorts are small and the loss of a small number of students can result in a large percent of attrition. Some of the common reasons for attrition given by Program Directors and faculty include: open enrollment with no ability to add additional screening or testing; student financial considerations; lack of academic preparation to successfully complete the course; lack of field experience; unforeseen medical or family issues; and others.

But the underlying question posed by some program staff is ‘Do attrition numbers really matter if the students we do graduate are competent?’ Well, yes it does, especially in a professional track (EMS) versus general education courses. EMS education is costly and

time consuming and most students who enroll at the Paramedic level have enough EMS experience to know this is a career they want to follow. The Paramedic program has a responsibility to provide the opportunity and resources for the student to be successful. Retention (or completion rates) is also important to colleges and institutions of higher education. State funding is frequently predicated on student completion of a course of study. While there may be pressure in some programs to enroll 'numbers' of students based on financial considerations, this may be off-set by the state funding return. Additionally, resources to assist students less academically prepared for paramedic classes can outweigh any income from the students.

Given the challenges of attrition in some organizational structures, what are suggestions and best practices for improving retention?

1. If your program is required to be open enrollment, explore with your administration if it is possible to add pre-requisites or screening for your specialized program. Some colleges are not able to permit additional requirements based on statutes or rules, but these practices are common in many colleges.
2. Interviews with applicants. Detail the requirements, schedules, rigor, cost, and other specifics to allow the student an informed choice regarding admission.
3. Provide a thorough orientation for a new cohort with all the information identified in the interview. Be sure it is before the add/drop date.
4. Invite/include student family members to the orientation session and explain the program requirements and how they can support their loved one.
5. Faculty should meet with enrolled students at specified points in the program to review academic status, clinical and field progress toward requirements, areas the student may be struggling and potential remediation/resources.
6. Suggest students form study groups that can provide mutual encouragement and enhance learning.
7. Conduct exit interviews with students who drop/withdraw from the program. You may think you know why they are leaving but there may be other reasons.
8. Facilitate outside tutoring/resources through faculty, adjunct instructors, or other sources.
9. For programs offered over multiple semesters, it can be easy for a student to just not return. Keep track of the cohort and make follow-up contact with any non-returning student.
10. If your program administration wants all applicants accepted/enrolled for financial reasons, have a crucial conversation with them about the goals and aims of an EMS career and the Paramedic program.
11. Connect with the college Student Services as soon as problems such as learning disabilities are discovered.
12. Provide advising for students regarding personal issues during the program.
13. Recommend potential applicants complete math, English, and other general education courses to prepare for the rigors of the program, especially if they have been out of the academic environment for some time.
14. Provide frequent evaluation of performance in all domains during the program.

Should every student that enrolls in a Paramedic program graduate? No. Are there students who should not have entered this career track? Yes. Does life/money get in the way of

education? Yes. And many more factors impact attrition/retention. But in the end: retention does matter and it is the responsibility of the program to work with each and every student to be successful!

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