Introduction to FastTrack™

FastTrack™ is a student tracking data system designed to help postsecondary students connect with institutions and help institutions serve their students. The unit-record information gathered and analyzed through FastTrack™ provides faculty and administrators with critical early warning data to determine what interventions students need to persist and succeed.

FastTrack™, designed, developed, and validated over the past 15 years, is based on research which suggests that student retention and academic success are best achieved by creating a match between student characteristics and the learning environments created by postsecondary institutions. In addition, effective retention programs are those that engage students in their studies by creating personalized learning opportunities and experiences. FastTrack™ is designed to achieve these goals by identifying the determinants of student outcomes for a specific institution and by creating partnerships for learning in an efficient and effective manner.

By tracking vital student data including high school grades, basic skills/aptitude test scores, and academic performance, and providing institutions with validated survey instruments to measure student characteristics, FastTrack™ provides institutions with the information they need to intervene at critical junctures and more effectively personalize and target information and services to students. And by tracking institutional performance over time, FastTrack™ better equips institutions to make effective policy and operations decisions to improve student retention and success.

Initially based on empirical research with over 6,000 new college students, FastTrack™, originally marketed as the Freshman Integration and Tracking System in Canada and the US, has been used in over 25 postsecondary institutions since 1995. Data have been collected on well over 50,000 freshmen in diverse jurisdictions, and FastTrack™ has benefited greatly from enhancements suggested by numerous practitioners. Operating in “single-station” or network configuration, FastTrack™ has been customized for use in US postsecondary institutions.

Conceptual Foundation

The design and development of FastTrack™ was based on research into student attrition in Canada and the U.S. (Swail, 2003; Dietsche, 1990; Tinto, 1986; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983, 1991). The key findings of this research are: 1) educational outcomes (departure, grades) are the product of an interaction between learner characteristics (e.g. academic aptitude, basic skills, goals, career interests, attitudes) and the learning environment he/she encounters; 2) this interaction results in a positive or negative experience for each learner and sets the stage for persistence/departure decisions; 3) the highest rates of failure and/or departure occur in the first year and retention efforts should focus on this period; 4) many who leave postsecondary institutions are in good academic standing and leave for reasons over which the institution has
some control; and 5) effective retention/success programs track learners to identify those “at risk” and intervene with targeted, personalized strategies. In essence, student retention and academic success are a product of the congruence or “fit” between learners and learning environments. Effective retention programs act to maximize this fit by creating customized learning opportunities and experiences.

To improve student retention and academic success, therefore, postsecondary institutions need to manage learning environments and engage students in a way that every individual receives the learning and support services he/she requires for success. The effect is to “integrate” learners into the learning environment. FastTrack™, a learner experience management software tool, helps achieve these goals by creating personalized partnerships for learning with every new student in an efficient and effective manner. When embraced by all stakeholders, FastTrack™ helps to build an institutional culture that actively:

- **Connects with learners:** By forming an explicit, ongoing relationship with individual learners, colleges and universities can: 1) enhance learner integration by identifying where institutional systems and services need to be improved, and; 2) provide personalized, targeted information during the first year, matching learner needs with learning environments and maximizing the number of students who achieve their postsecondary goals.

- **Connects with learning:** By providing detailed information on critical aspects of learning environments including the who, why and how of educational outcomes, those who manage the educational enterprise are better equipped to make effective policy and operations decisions. This “diagnostic” information is not usually available in postsecondary institutions.

### Typical Information Captured

As illustrated on the following page, FastTrack™ typically integrates and stores five types of data for every new student. The system, however, may be modified in many areas by individual institutions to accommodate their unique context.

1. **High School Grades:** Selected high school course grades (e.g. English, math, biology, chemistry etc.) can be stored in the database. Users may customize this section to select desired/relevant courses unique to a particular educational jurisdiction.

2. **Basic Skills/Aptitude Test Scores:** Students’ scores on tests of aptitude/basic skills (e.g. ACT, SAT, literacy, numeracy, study skills) can be stored in the system. This component can be modified to accommodate local conditions (e.g. number and type of tests).

3. **Information on Students at Entry:** The Partners in Education Inventory, a 100+ item questionnaire administered at the start of the first term, provides a comprehensive profile of new student characteristics in terms of their demographics, high school background, attitudes, perceptions, needs, goals, and behaviors.

4. **Information on Student Experiences:** The Student Experience Inventory, a 100+ item questionnaire administered at mid-term, provides a comprehensive description of the characteristics and first-term experiences of each student including their support needs, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. These data act as an “early warning system” to identify both successful and unsuccessful students who are considering leaving college. Validation studies have shown this prediction to have an accuracy of 80%.

5. **Student Achievement:** Information on academic performance (program average, grades in selected courses, percent of courses failed), enrolment status, and course load are captured at both mid- and end-of-term, where available. This constitutes the “outcomes” section of FastTrack™ used to identify four types of student: academically successful students who persist,
academically successful students who leave, academic failures who persist on probationary status, and academic failures who drop out.

**Uses of the Information**

*FastTrack™* information may be used in various ways by vice-presidents, deans, counselors, faculty advisors, department heads, service directors, recruitment officers, and institutional research staff. The data provide input on the following topics:

**A. CONNECTING WITH LEARNERS**

1. **New Student Profiles:** Describes the characteristics (e.g. demographic, academic, needs, goals, attitudes, behaviors) of new students at an institution, campus, or program/major level. Year-to-year comparisons can identify trends suggesting support service or curriculum changes to increase student success and persistence.

2. **Service Delivery/Capacity:** Identifies individual student needs and delivers personalized services information to every new student. Also quantifies new student need/demand for each support service area to help allocate resources in an efficient and effective manner.

3. **College Image/Recruitment:** Describes how students access information about, and on what basis they choose to attend a particular institution. Measures new students’ perceptions of a college at entry and acts as an inexpensive proxy for image research. Recruitment information by geographic location is also available using zip code data. Describes the characteristics of market segments (e.g. mature students, direct-entry etc.) to inform strategic recruitment.

4. **Customer Service:** Provides information on student interactions with staff during the application, admissions, orientation, and registration period. Constitutes an easy and efficient
measure of an institution’s customer service climate.

5. **Counseling/Advising Support:** Detailed information on students who agree to share their data is available to counseling/advising staff, both at entry and at mid-term. This may be used to support one-on-one discussions focusing on student success and problem resolution.

6. **Mid-Term Student Profile:** Documents the characteristics and experiences of new students at mid-term/year. Learners’ support service needs, academic behaviors, perceptions of program/major and the institution, and attitudes toward college education and work are available for the entire institution, by campus, or by program/major/faculty.

7. **Early Alert:** Identifies students at mid-term who are considering dropping out of college and forms the basis for proactive, targeted retention programs before students leave.

8. **Service Delivery/Use:** Identifies individual student learning support needs and targets service delivery information to each student at mid-term/year. Quantifies new student demand for services and supports the delivery of these in an efficient and effective manner. Measures the type and amount of service use for every student during the critical transition-to-college period. Informs resource allocation and operational decisions.

### B. CONNECTING WITH LEARNING

1. **Learning Climate Analysis:** Describes the learning culture and climate of an institution, specific campus, or program/major/faculty in terms of peer and faculty interaction, attitudes and perceptions, academic behaviors, participation in extracurricular activities, difficulties in college, and support service use.

2. **Student Performance Analysis:** Provides a tabular or graphical representation of course grades, overall average, enrollment status and courses failed and dropped for an institution, specific campus or program/major/faculty at mid- and end of term/year.

3. **Student Success Analysis:** Analysis of the integrated FastTrack™ data provides insight into the determinants of student academic success or failure for an entire institution, specific campus or individual program/major/faculty.

4. **Student Retention Analysis:** Analysis of the integrated FastTrack™ data provides insight into the determinants of student departure (attrition) for an entire institution, specific campus or individual program/major/faculty.

### FastTrack™ Impact and Deliverables

The list below describes, in succinct terms, the key deliverables of the FastTrack™. Achieving these requires that institutions create both an appropriate context for system implementation and the collection of all data elements (as outlined above) for all learners. The potential impacts of FastTrack™ are:

1. Create explicit “success/learning” partnerships with new students
2. Provide a diagnosis of individual learner needs
3. Create customized learning opportunities for every learner and promote success by distributing a “Personalized Learning Plan”
4. Match learner needs to college learning and support resources
5. Define characteristics of learner success for individual programs/majors
6. Identify determinants of learner persistence/departure by program/major
7. Define characteristics of learners by program/major and over time
8. Diagnose the learning environment/climate of a program or major
9. Target institutional policy, operations and resources to maximize learning
10. Document learner success and college impact on learners
11. Track institutional performance over time and demonstrate improvements
12. Inform constituencies regarding optimum learning environments
13. Identify inadequate inputs (e.g. funding) which impede learner progress
14. Identify areas for modification to improve student success rates
15. Measure the impact/effectiveness of new retention/learning initiatives
16. Provide a measure of learner preparedness for high schools
17. Provide a basis for institutional strategic marketing/positioning

Full implementation of FastTrack™ includes building a culture to support data collection processes and orienting learners to the “partnership” concept. This, in turn, creates a learning environment that maximizes the probability of student success.

**FastTrack™ Features**

FastTrack™ has six key features. They are:

1. **Choice of Software:** Users can choose to install the software with a “single-station” configuration for individual users or as a server-based network version.

2. **Student Reports:** The *Personalized Learning Plan* is provided to every student at entry and again at mid term or mid year. The content of each report is based on student responses to questions (*Partners in Education* at entry and *Student Experience Inventory* at mid term) about their support needs in various areas. The report then presents each student with information on the specific support services they say they need at each point in time. Sample reports appear at the end of this overview.

3. **Standard Reports:** Users can access, via a point-and-click menu, sixteen reports (7 from PEI, 9 from SEI) that only require specifying production parameters such as campus, program, or major before printing begins. All other aspects are pre-set.

Reports from the *Partners in Education Inventory* include:

- **Demographic Report:** Provides a description of the new student population in terms of age, gender, first language, socio-economic status, main activity prior to enrolling, number of financial dependents, living arrangements, hours working, and citizenship status.

- **Academic Background:** Shows the highest level of education attained by students, their study habits prior to entering college, the highest level of education desired and their high school study, class attendance and homework completion habits.

- **Recruitment Report:** Identifies what students perceive as the major sources of information about the college, on what basis they chose to attend the college, and their attendance at various recruitment events such as Open House, Orientation etc. The *Zip Code Report* generated via the Custom Report utility shows the geographic distribution of the permanent home address for all new students.

- **Customer Service Report:** Information on type of interactions students have with staff during the application, admissions, orientation and registration period.
e. *Perception of Institution Report*: Reports on students’ attitudes re: their program, faculty and the institution more generally as they begin their studies. A reflection of their initial impressions of the institution.

f. *Student Goals*: Provides a breakdown of students’ responses regarding possible reasons for attending college.

Reports from the **Student Experience Inventory** include:

a. *Leavers Report*: Ranks all students in an institution, campus or program in terms of their propensity to drop out at mid-semester. Validation studies show this report can accurately identify 8 in ten learners in this category.

b. *Difficulties in College Report*: Summarizes areas of the college experience that students find most difficult. Options include dealing with course content and workload, balancing the demands of studies with those of work or family, managing time, meeting with faculty outside class, dealing with policies and procedures and knowing who to talk to about a problem.

c. *Perception of Program Report*: Summarizes students’ views of their studies regarding level of interest and degree of preparation for a future occupation.

d. *Mid-Term Attitudes Profile*: Summarizes students’ attitudes regarding their confidence in success, occupational uncertainty, commitment to graduation and commitment to their institution.

e. *Co-curricular Activity*: Quantifies student participation in extracurricular activities such as varsity sports, clubs and their use of services such as academic advising, career counseling, language or math labs, and library or disability services.

f. *Interaction with Faculty*: Describes the quantity and quality of students’ interactions with faculty.

g. *Interaction with Peers*: Describes the quantity and quality of students’ interactions with their peers.

Examples of two *Standard* reports are provided at the end of this overview.

4. **Custom Reports**: A user-friendly tool is available when a non-standard report is desired. The report content is defined by the user and can draw from any data source.

5. **Graphs**: A graphical representation of any data element or combination of data elements is possible with a comprehensive and easy-to-use graph tool. For example, an analysis of the relationship between admissions selection criteria and student academic success, literacy skill level at entry and student academic success or student part-time work and college performance may be obtained in a matter of seconds. Two sample graphs are presented on pages 11 and 12.

6. **Ease of Use**: All components of *FastTrack™* have been specifically designed to be user-friendly. The objective has been to provide staff with access to information via reports in a timely, easy-to-use fashion. This is an absolute necessity given current demands on administrators’ time, the accelerated pace of change in postsecondary education and the increased need for accurate and relevant information on which to base decisions.

For more information about *FastTrack™*, call (757) 271-2952 or email Patricia Moore Shaffer at pmoore@educationalpolicy.org. The current price structure is available online at [www.studentretention.org/fasttrack.html](http://www.studentretention.org/fasttrack.html).
Report at Entry of Students Reporting Need and Interest in Receiving Assistance with Writing Skills

**HUMBER COLLEGE**

*Writing Skills Need: Contact List at College Entry*

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# Humber College

## Mid-Term Report: List of Students Most Likely to Drop Out

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<td>MCC C. JENNIFER</td>
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<td>Occupational Therapist Assistant</td>
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</table>

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In partnership with the Educational Policy Institute
### The first page of the Standard Demographic Profile Report

#### (PEI) Demographic Profile

**Gender**
- Female 40.3% (73)
- Male 59.7% (74)
- Not answered 0.7% (1)

**Your age in years**
- < 19 20.7% (50)
- 19 and < 21 49.6% (63)
- 21 and < 23 13.8% (23)
- 23 and < 26 7.6% (11)
- 26 and < 31 3.4% (6)
- 31 and < 35 1.4% (2)
- 35 and < 40 0.0% (1)
- 40 and < 45 0.0% (1)
- 45 and < 50 0.7% (1)
- 50 0.7% (1)
- Not answered 6.2% (5)

**16. Which language did you learn first?**
- French 3.4% (5)
- English 63.4% (92)
- Aboriginal (Cree, Inuit, Ojibway, Mi'kmaq) 0.0%
- Spanish 2.0% (4)
- Other European (e.g. German, Greek, etc.) 9.7% (14)
- Indo-Pakistan (Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, etc.) 1.8% (7)
- East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.) 5.5% (9)
- Not answered 4.1% (6)

**17. Father's highest level of education**
- Less than elementary school completion 6.2% (9)
- Completed elementary school 2.8% (4)
- Some high school 15.9% (23)
- Completed high school 20.3% (29)
- Some trade/technical training 4.1% (6)
- Completed college or CEGEP 16.5% (24)
- Some university 3.0% (13)
- Completed Bachelor's degree 13.6% (20)
- Partial Master's or Ph.D. study 0.7% (1)
- Completed Master's or Ph.D. 2.8% (4)
- Completed professional degree (Lawyer, M.D.) 2.1% (3)
- Not answered 5.5% (8)

**18. Mother's highest level of education**
- Less than elementary school completion 2.6% (4)
- Completed elementary school 2.8% (4)
- Some high school 15.1% (19)
- Completed high school 27.3% (40)
- Some trade/technical training 4.3% (6)
- Completed college or CEGEP 21.4% (31)
- Some university 10.3% (15)
- Completed Bachelor's degree 5.0% (13)
- Partial Master's or Ph.D. study 0.7% (1)
- Completed Master's or Ph.D. 1.4% (2)
- Completed professional degree (Lawyer, M.D.) 0.0%
- Not answered 5.5% (8)
What students say they have difficulty with when asked at mid semester

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>Has not been difficult at all</th>
<th>Has been a little difficult</th>
<th>Has been quite difficult</th>
<th>Has been very difficult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with the program workload</td>
<td>23.2% (19)</td>
<td>40.6% (56)</td>
<td>24.8% (24)</td>
<td>0.4% (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding time to study/do homework</td>
<td>22.5% (31)</td>
<td>40.6% (56)</td>
<td>24.8% (24)</td>
<td>0.4% (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing school with job and/or family</td>
<td>29.7% (41)</td>
<td>41.9% (44)</td>
<td>22.5% (31)</td>
<td>10.9% (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The content of college-level courses</td>
<td>22.5% (46)</td>
<td>47.1% (60)</td>
<td>11.6% (16)</td>
<td>4.3% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding out about rules/regulations</td>
<td>68.8% (65)</td>
<td>23.2% (22)</td>
<td>3.6% (3)</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting with faculty outside class</td>
<td>50.7% (70)</td>
<td>30.3% (40)</td>
<td>6.8% (8)</td>
<td>3.3% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>24.6% (34)</td>
<td>36.5% (49)</td>
<td>26.1% (36)</td>
<td>10.1% (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing who to talk to when I have a problem</td>
<td>42.0% (59)</td>
<td>36.2% (49)</td>
<td>13.0% (15)</td>
<td>4.3% (6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relationship between students’ writing skill assessed at entry and college average

[Graph showing the relationship between students' writing skill assessed at entry and college average]
How increasing involvement in part-time work affects college average

First-Term Final Average by Hours Working: Humber College

- No work
- 10-14 hrs
- 20-24 hrs
- 30-34 hrs
- <10 hrs
- 15-19 hrs
- 26-29 hrs
- =>35 hrs