Retention with Rigor

Strengthening Engagement Without Compromise

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Objectives

- Describe the common factors that contribute to attrition
- Distinguish between support strategies that promote success and those that unintentionally lower expectations
- Identify practical approaches to fostering a culture of encouragement, accountability, and professional growth while maintaining program standards
- Develop at least one actionable strategy that can be implemented within your own program to enhance retention without compromising competency

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A note before we begin

- Critical reflection and assessment will be ongoing themes throughout this talk
- The purpose is not to judge past decisions, leaders, or ourselves
- Examining *practices* is not the same as judging people or lowering standards

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Looking beyond admission

Objective 1: Describe the common factors contributing to attrition

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Quiet reflection

Many programs admit only a small percentage of applicants, who are intentionally selected based on strong academic records and their perceived likelihood of success.

Reflective question: If we're admitting the strongest applicants via selective admission, why do capable students still struggle?

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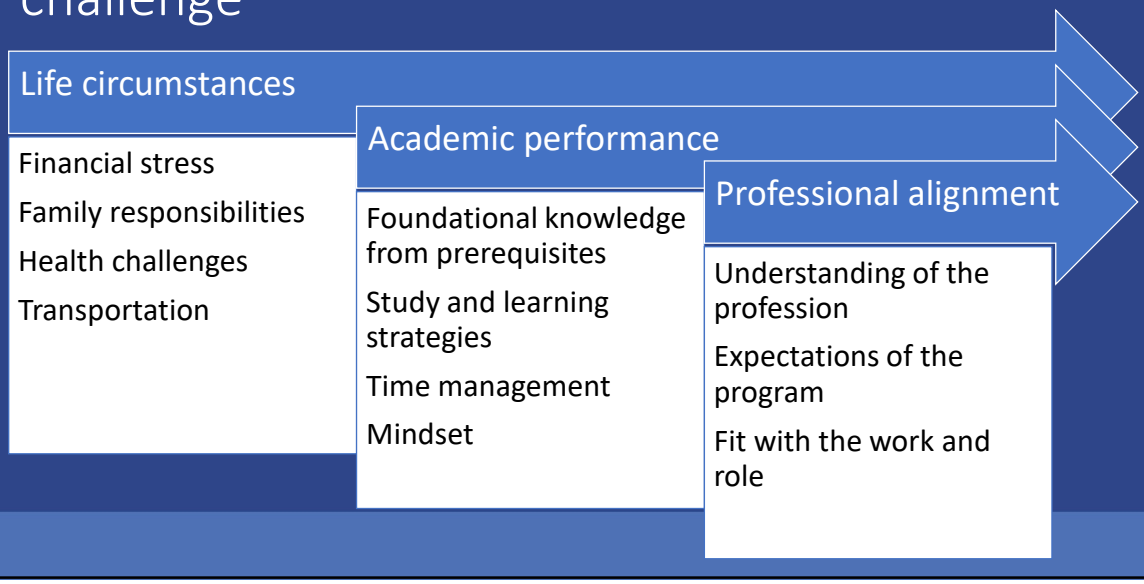
Selective admission doesn't predict every challenge



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But that's just one part of the bigger picture

Student factors influence whether challenges occur.

Program practices influence when challenges are recognized, and what happens next.

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What can programs influence?

Clarity	Are expectations clear before and during the program?
Consistency	Are standards and messages consistent across faculty?
Timing	Are concerns addressed before students reach a crisis?
Response	Does support promote learning, reflection, and accountability?
Difficulty	Do program practices protect competency, or create unnecessary barriers?

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How can we address the factors within our influence without changing the standards students must meet?

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Rethinking support and rigor

Objective 2: Distinguish between support strategies that promote success and those that unintentionally lower expectations

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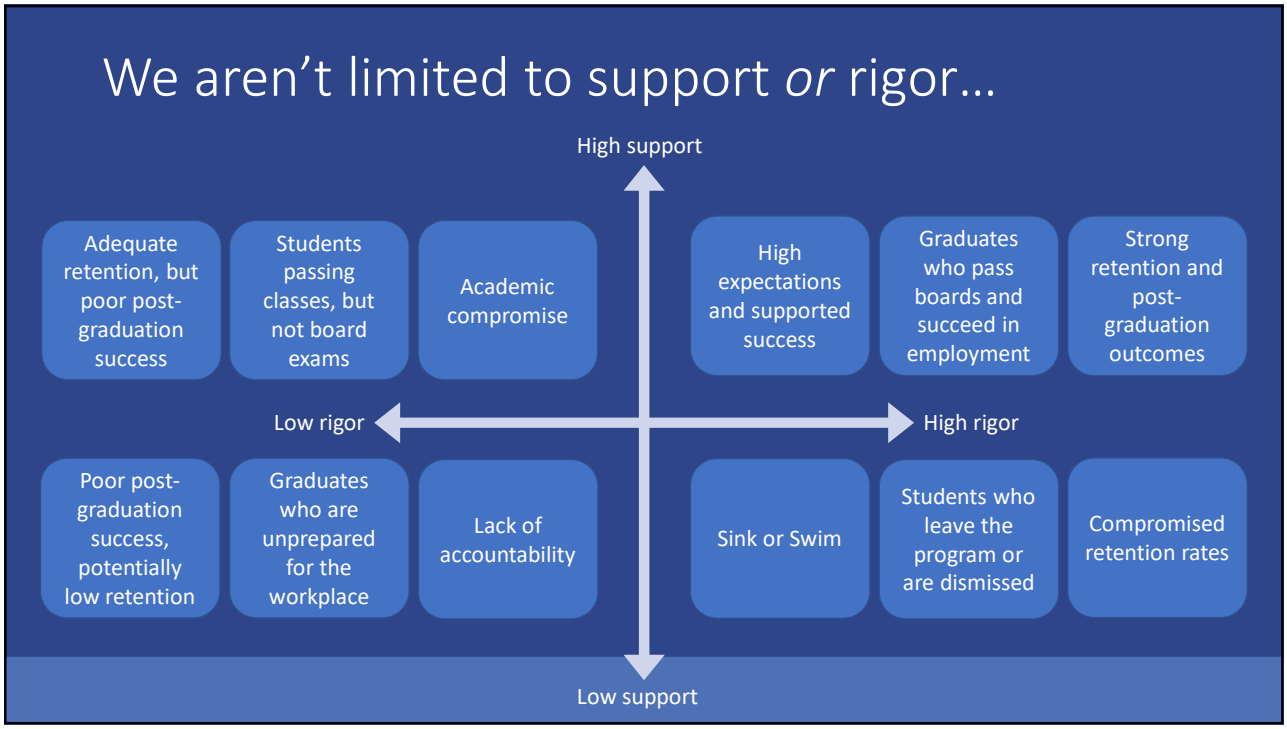

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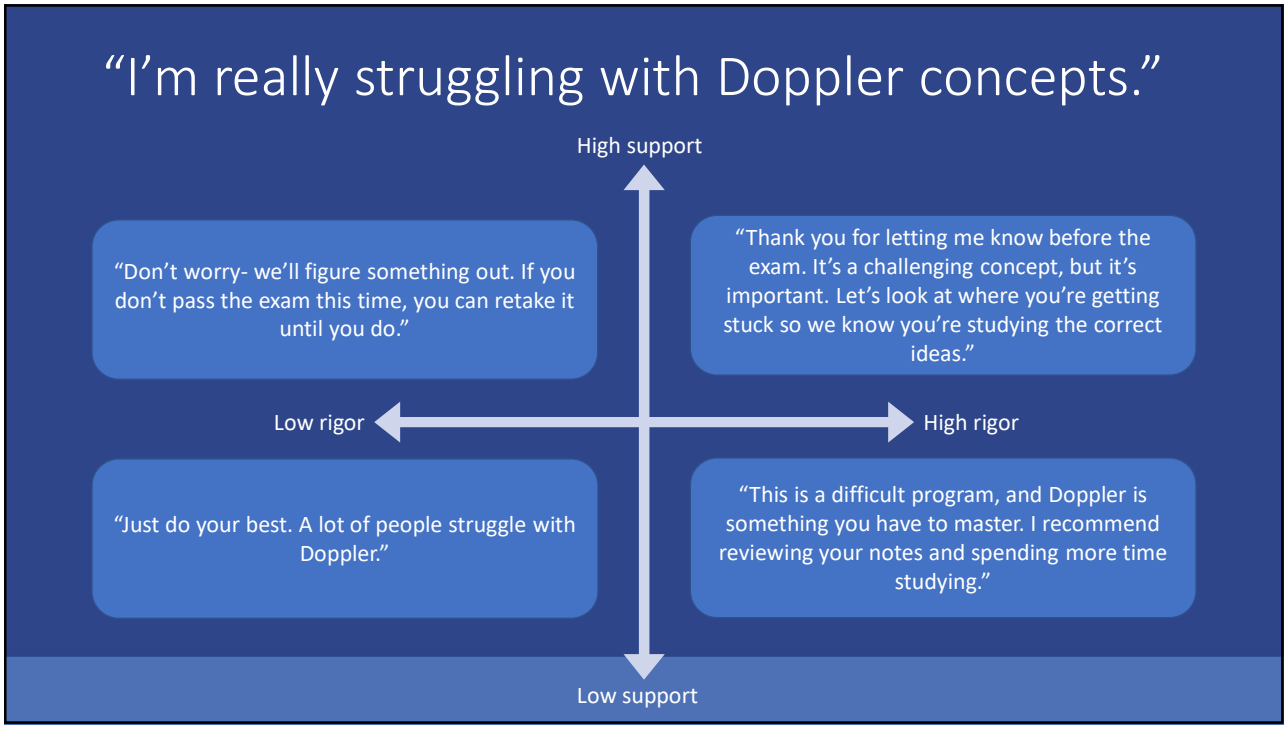

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A critical distinction

Difficulty is not rigor.

Support is not the removal of standards or accountability.

Rigor is defined by what students must ultimately know and do,
not by how difficult we make the path.

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Scaffolding support from application to graduation

Objective 3: Identify practical approaches to fostering a culture of encouragement, accountability, and professional growth while maintaining program standards

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Where are students encountering preventable barriers?

- Before students enter
- During the program
- When students struggle

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Before students enter: Are expectations clear and reasonable?

- Provide a realistic preview of program demands
- Explain the profession in depth
- Question whether attempts to predict success inadvertently penalize potential



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During the program: Are concerns identified early enough?

- Intervene early
- Create structured opportunities for support
- Standardize communication and documentation about concerns
- Balance encouragement with accountability

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When students struggle: Does our response pair support with accountability?

- Require reflection before reassessment
- Develop targeted, individualized remediation
- Standards and expectations remain unchanged
- Pair faculty support with student accountability

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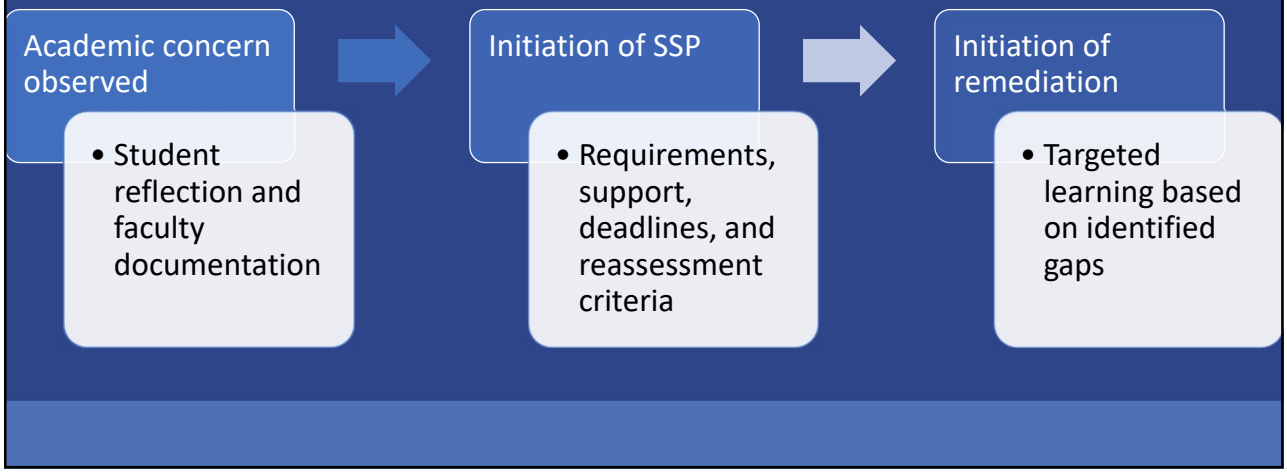
What this actually looks like for us



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Individualized *support* ≠ individualized *standards*

- SSPs and remediations are individualized based on student struggles, but the criteria for initiating them are standardized
- May include assignments, quizzes/tests, mandatory tutoring, etc.
- ***Students are responsible for completing the agreed upon terms***
  - Failure to complete SSP/remediation terms can lead to dismissal from the program

The goal is not to recover a score. It's to develop deeper understanding to support success in future courses.

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Remediation reality check

- Meaningful remediation requires additional effort from students and faculty
- Must have clear and realistic remediation requirements
  - Must be feasible to deliver at the program's scale
- It's not a guarantee of success

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What are the outcomes telling us?

- Our cohorts are small, so these results don't establish causation
- Initial results are promising

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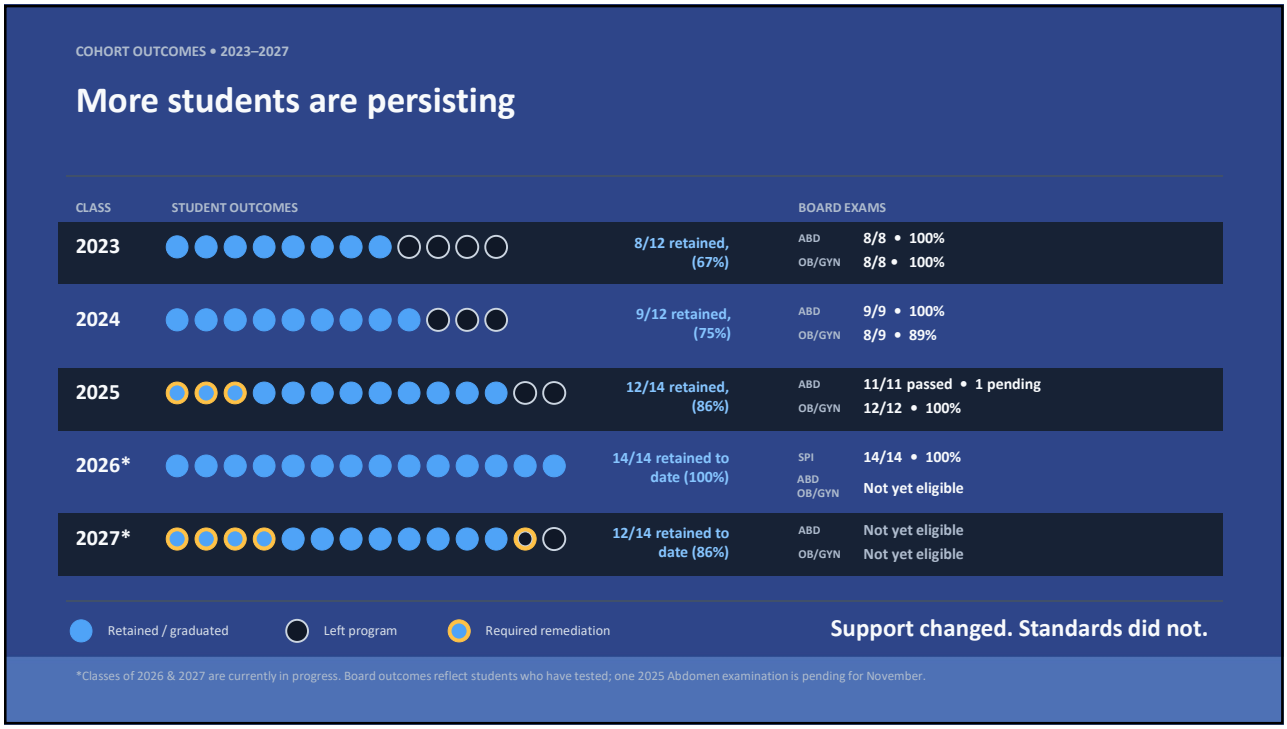

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From reflection to action

Objective 4: Develop at least one actionable strategy that can be implemented within your own program to enhance retention without compromising competency expectations

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Where is your opportunity?

- Before students enter
- During the program
- When struggles arise

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Where is your opportunity?

- What is one practice you can examine?
- Who should be part of that conversation?
- What is one realistic first step?

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Support changes how students reach the standard, not the standard itself.

Retention and rigor can strengthen one another when support is intentional, accountable, and tied to competency.

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Thank you

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Resources

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