



PROMISING AND PRACTICAL STRATEGIES TO INCREASE POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS: THE KAPLAN COMMITMENT

Kaplan University is a regionally accredited institution providing high-quality undergraduate, graduate, and continuing professional education to over 50,000 students – both online and at 16 on-ground campuses and learning centers throughout the country. Kaplan University conferred more than 16,000 degrees in the 2010-2011 academic year.

Kaplan University’s academic approach is what makes us “a different school of thought.” We deliver outcomes-focused learning, a personalized experience customized to each student that emphasizes academic success and graduation, and a highly supportive environment for our students – all aimed at enhancing student learning, retention, completion, and graduation.

We aspire to be a leader in the way we serve our students. That is why we launched in November 2010 the Kaplan Commitment to ensure that students are academically and financially committed to their education.

A Detailed Description of the Promising and Practical Strategy

The Kaplan Commitment

The Kaplan Commitment allows students attending Kaplan University (and Kaplan Higher Education campuses) to attend classes for several weeks without incurring any tuition obligation or debt. All first-time, undergraduate Kaplan University (KU) students receive the benefit of the Kaplan Commitment. New undergraduate students at KU do not need to apply separately for the program; in fact, they cannot enroll on a non-conditional basis.

At KU, this risk-free, conditional acceptance period lasts five weeks. The conditional acceptance period is not an orientation; students take real classes for real credit. During this period, students can assess whether the coursework meets their educational needs before making any further investment in their education, and whether they can make the time commitment required to attend the University. Also during this period, KU provides normal academic evaluations (a combination of tests and assignments) to help students determine whether they are likely to be successful in their chosen courses of study. The Kaplan Commitment gives students an opportunity to show both themselves and KU that they are ready for the University.

Specifically, the Kaplan Commitment conditional acceptance period operates similarly to the general KU enrollment and matriculation process. Prospective students take an entrance assessment; are interviewed; sign an Enrollment Agreement; and pay a nominal (less than \$50), non-refundable application fee before starting classes. In order to be fully admitted, students

participating in the Kaplan Commitment (those who are considered conditionally admitted) must meet the following requirements:

- They must earn a grade of at least 65 percent in each of their classes.
- They must meet attendance requirements.
- They must complete all of their financial documents.

Students who successfully complete the conditional acceptance period and become fully admitted will earn credit for the courses in which they receive a passing grade. Most undergraduate courses run for ten weeks, so while students may successfully finish the first five weeks, they will need to pass the entire course successfully to earn credit.

Students who voluntarily withdraw from their program during the conditional acceptance period, or who do not pass the academic evaluations, do not have to pay for their coursework and do not receive credit for the classes they attended. These students incur no financial obligation to Kaplan (other than the nominal application fee), nor do they take on unnecessary federal grants or student loans because no Title IV grants or loans are disbursed to Kaplan Commitment students during the conditional acceptance period. This feature of the program protects both students and taxpayers.

College Completion Obstacle Addressed

President Obama has challenged America to achieve an ambitious goal – to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020.ⁱ Accomplishing this goal will require our nation’s collective effort to produce millions of additional college graduates than would occur under current college completion rates. A critical component will be meeting the needs of nontraditional students who face life, family, and work challenges that make it more difficult for them to succeed in college.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a student is considered nontraditional if he or she exhibits any of the following seven risk factors:

- Delays enrollment into postsecondary education.
- Attends part-time.
- Is financially independent of parents.
- Works full-time while enrolled.
- Has dependents other than a spouse.
- Is a single parent.
- Lacks a standard high school diploma.

According to one NCES study, nationally, 31 percent of nontraditional undergraduates with a bachelor’s degree objective attained a degree within five years compared with 54 percent of traditional undergraduates. In addition, 38 percent of nontraditional undergraduates left school in their first year compared with 16 percent of traditional undergraduates.ⁱⁱ

Students who attend KU are primarily nontraditional students. They are mostly older students (63 percent are older than age 30) and first-generation college students. Further, the average Kaplan University student arrives with three of the NCES-identified factors that increase their risk of attrition compared with 1.5 for the typical undergraduate student across all U.S. colleges and universities.

The Kaplan Commitment is designed to identify as early as possible those nontraditional students who will more likely persist and complete their degrees or certificates. Many nontraditional students experience significant fear and anxiety about enrolling in college, due to low-self esteem, doubt about their ability learn, extended periods away from an academic environment, and other factors. The Kaplan Commitment allows students who are afraid to start school to try college-level studies; once these students see that they can be successful, they gain the confidence to continue on.

Theory of Action that Provides the Basis for the Strategy

The Kaplan Commitment is aimed at benefiting students (and taxpayers) by focusing on three goals:

- (1) Ensuring that students have full information about their educational programs and what it takes to succeed.
- (2) Enrolling students who have the academic preparation needed to be successful in obtaining a postsecondary degree or certificate.
- (3) Reducing unnecessary student debt.

The Kaplan Commitment supports these goals by:

- Allowing students to experience real Kaplan courses, as well as giving them time to assess the coursework and accurately evaluate its demands on their work and family commitments. Students have the opportunity to prove to themselves that they are ready to tackle college-level work and that their personal lives can accommodate the time commitment required.
- Lowering students' risk by eliminating any financial obligation for students who ultimately decide not to pursue their education, or who would be unlikely to succeed in the rigorous KU learning environment.

History of How the Strategy was Developed

The Kaplan Commitment was implemented in the context of Kaplan's ongoing commitment to improve continually, through innovative means, the ways in which we recruit, educate, and support our students. The Kaplan Commitment is very expensive to Kaplan, but we believe it is very beneficial to students in multiple ways. For example, Kaplan initiated the Kaplan Commitment, in part, to alleviate the possibility of overly aggressive student recruiting; i.e., to provide a safety net for any new student who is not satisfied. For example, if a student feels that

he or she made a mistake by enrolling, regardless of reason, he or she can simply withdraw at any time during the initial period without incurring any debt.

In addition, the Kaplan Commitment was launched to help ensure that Kaplan's students are more committed, better academically prepared, and more likely to complete their programs. For example, KU recognized that most dropouts occur relatively early in students' academic careers. Analyzing longitudinal data, the University observed that lower first-term grades were associated with both lower graduation rates and higher student loan default rates. The data showed that students obtaining averages below a "C" in their first term of study were at substantially greater risk for these longer-term problems.

How Outcomes are Measured and Any Evaluations of the Strategy

Data collected since the launch of the Kaplan Commitment and analyzed by KU's Office of Institutional Effectiveness suggest that most students (71 percent) succeed in transitioning from the conditional admittance period to regular enrollment as a KU student. Another 17 percent of students are dismissed from further study due to poor academic performance. Some students (10 percent) opt out of further study for personal reasons. Finally, a small percentage (2 percent) fails to provide required documents. Success rates are somewhat greater for KU's campus-based students than for online students.

While it is too soon to have definitive results because Kaplan has had little more than one year of experience with the Kaplan Commitment, Kaplan is hopeful that the Kaplan Commitment will also reduce student loan defaults. In our experience, students who withdraw prior to program completion demonstrate a higher loan default rate than those who continue through to graduation. We believe that the Kaplan Commitment will help improve retention and completion rates, thereby leading to improved federal cohort default rates.

Implementation Challenges

Because KU enrolls many students who are transferring from other institutions, new students can register in nearly any course the University offers. As a consequence, it is critical for KU faculty to know which students in their classes are new to the University, so that they can ensure that all grading is completed in a timely manner for the homework assigned in week five, the last week of the Kaplan Commitment conditional enrollment period. Our normal grading service level is one week after submission. For new students, that time is reduced to three days in week five. Hence, it was important for us to create automated ways for the University's registrar to communicate with faculty about their new students.

Moreover, it was challenging to orchestrate the scheduling and disbursement of federal Title IV student financial aid to prevent the award of funds before a student is fully accepted into enrollment and, subsequently, to trigger the release of funds when the student is accepted.

Factors Important to the Success of the Strategy

Implementing the Kaplan Commitment strategy required collaboration among nearly all departments within and supporting the University. The Admissions Department developed materials to help advisors discuss the Kaplan Commitment with students so that students had complete and comprehensive information. Financial Aid revised its approach to packaging student financial aid awards to students. The Registrar's Office created reports and notifications for faculty to help them recognize their Kaplan Commitment students. Academic advisors created approaches to reach out to students early in their conditional period to encourage them to participate actively in their courses and submit all their homework right from the beginning of the term.

How Other Institutions Might Best Replicate the Strategy

We are pleased that the Department of Education issued on June 7, 2011 specific guidance (Dear Colleague Letter GEN-11-12: Trial Periods of Enrollment) to institutions regarding trial enrollment programs similar to the Kaplan Commitment. Such guidance provides additional regulatory clarity that will facilitate the implementation of this promising strategy by other institutions. Instituting "cost-free mechanisms to minimize the risk of failure among students," such as the Kaplan Commitment, is also a recommended practice cited as an innovation in a 2012 report of the federal Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance.ⁱⁱⁱ

Federal Regulatory or Statutory Requirements That Made Successful Implementation Easier or More Difficult

During the development of the Kaplan Commitment it became clear that this ground-breaking strategy would need to be fully compliant with the complex regulatory requirements governing the federal Title IV federal student aid programs. Accordingly, we conducted a full review of the Department of Education's Title IV regulations and guidance to ensure that disbursements of federal Pell Grants and Title IV loans to eligible students could be delayed under the Kaplan Commitment until students completed their trial periods of enrollment and became regular students. We found that the Title IV regulatory framework provides clear guidance on how students would qualify for federal student aid under the Kaplan Commitment. The regulations allow students to qualify for aid once they meet the conditions of acceptance and are officially accepted into an eligible degree, diploma or certificate program. The regulations also allow that aid to cover the students' full period of enrollment, including the trial period. This regulatory interpretation was confirmed in the Department's June 7, 2011 Dear Colleague Letter.

ⁱ President Barack Obama, Speech to Joint Session of Congress, February 2009.

ⁱⁱ Horn, L. J., and C. D. Carroll, *Nontraditional Undergraduates: Trends in Enrollment from 1986 to 1992 and Persistence and Attainment Among 1989-90 Beginning Postsecondary Students* (Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 1996).

ⁱⁱⁱU.S. Department of Education, Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSFA), *Pathways to Success: Integrating Learning with Life and Work to Increase National College Completion* (Washington DC: ACSFA, 2012).

Appendix A: Keywords and Tags

Adult Education

Certificate Attainment

Degree Attainment

Student Services

Non-Traditional Age Students

Retention

Trial Periods of Enrollment

Underrepresented Students