

Ensuring Sixth Form Students Feel Confident in Their Choice:

Expert Insights from a Seasoned Educator



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September is here, the time when Sixth Form students return, settle in, and adjust to their new academic environment. As head of Sixth Form or admissions, you've worked hard to get these students to commit—through conversations, open houses, parent meetings, and countless reassuring messages. Yet, as the term begins, some may feel doubts creeping in. How can you help them feel certain that they made the right decision? A seasoned educator, Tom, recently shared his strategies for creating a supportive, enriching Sixth Form culture that ensures students feel they belong.

Building a Cohesive Culture: The Backbone of Retention

Creating a distinct Sixth Form culture is essential to engaging students, from Year 11 and even earlier, so they'll want to stay through to Year 13. Tom emphasised that as the head of Sixth Form, you are the driving force behind this culture. But it's not just about your leadership; it's about fostering a community where students feel like they're part of something special. This requires a culture built on shared values and goals, where everyone, including your team and the students, feels aligned.

“Culture,” Tom explained, “is a way of life for the people involved.” For him, it was essential to instill values of kindness and compassion. This wasn’t just lip service; his door was always open to students, whether they needed advice on academics, personal matters, or even financial aid. When students know they have a safe space to voice their concerns and a support system to lean on, they’re far more likely to feel secure and remain in the program.

Finding Your “Turnip”: Creating a Unique Sixth Form Identity

What is the “turnip” of your Sixth Form—the unique trait that sets your program apart? Tom shared a story about a Cambridge University applicant who brought a turnip to his interview, unintentionally setting himself apart from other candidates. The lesson? Sometimes, it’s the unique, memorable aspects of your program that leave a lasting impression.

Your Sixth Form’s unique identity might be rooted in its approach to career preparation, student engagement, or extracurricular opportunities. Make sure these distinguishing features are visible, not only to prospective Year 11 students but also to younger students in Year 8 and Year 9. This will inspire them to stay in-house rather than seek alternatives when they reach Sixth Form age.

Engaging the Team: Staff and Students as Key Allies

A cohesive, motivated team is critical to any successful Sixth Form. Tom highlighted the importance of having a hand-picked team that shares your vision. A strong, collaborative team of tutors, teachers, and student leaders can help carry out your initiatives, and when they are all aligned, the culture you’re striving for takes on a life of its own.

He also underscored the importance of engaging students as advocates for the Sixth Form. Current Sixth Form students can be mentors, event organisers, and ambassadors, showing prospective students what it means to be part of the Sixth Form community. When younger students see Sixth Formers as role models, they’re more likely to aspire to join the program themselves.

Knowing Your Students: Building Bonds That Retain

Knowing each student personally is a game-changer. “Know your students,” Tom advised, emphasising that when students feel genuinely seen and understood, they are far more likely to stay. This means understanding their aspirations, challenges, and even personal lives. He made an effort to get to know all 300 Sixth Form students at his school, even if it meant learning about their personalities, strengths and weaknesses. Building these connections creates trust, which, in turn, solidifies their commitment to the Sixth Form.

Embracing Diversity and Inclusion

Today's Sixth Forms must be inclusive spaces that embrace diversity across class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. When students feel accepted, understood, and respected for who they are, they are more likely to stay engaged and succeed. Tom highlighted the importance of fostering a space where diversity is celebrated and students feel they can freely express themselves.

Communicating Values to Parents

Parents play a critical role in supporting students' decisions. As Tom pointed out, regular parent meetings, open evenings, and parent-teacher conferences provide valuable opportunities to share the Sixth Form's values and goals. When parents trust the Sixth Form team and believe in its mission, they are more likely to encourage their children to stay in the program.

Going Beyond Academics: Preparing Students for Life

While academic performance is key, Tom stressed that Sixth Form is not just a "factory" for churning out grades. It's about equipping students with life skills that prepare them for university, careers, and personal growth. Bringing in guest speakers, organising career fairs, or introducing clubs and societies around issues like climate change, social justice, or technology awareness can give students a sense of purpose beyond academics. By connecting them to real-world issues, you're helping them see how their education can make a meaningful difference.

Leading with Consistency and High Standards

"Consistency is key," Tom emphasised, explaining that maintaining high standards in both academic and behavioural expectations fosters respect. Students notice and appreciate a steady, supportive environment, and this consistency helps create a secure and motivating atmosphere.

Leveraging Technology: Streamlining Admissions and Retention

Tom noted that effective Sixth Forms must be equipped to handle administrative demands efficiently. Online admissions and data tracking can be invaluable tools, ensuring you have accurate enrollment numbers and feedback for planning. With a streamlined process in place, you're better able to focus on nurturing the student experience, which ultimately drives retention.

Creating a welcoming and inclusive culture that inspires students to stay engaged is a year-round effort. By building a unique Sixth Form identity, engaging your team, knowing your students, and establishing a consistent, values-driven approach, you can ensure that students not only stay but thrive in their final years of school. As Tom so effectively illustrated, when students feel like they belong, they're more likely to stay the course, confident that they've made the right choice.