

# Taking Student Retention Seriously

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## Introduction

Many colleges speak of the importance of increasing student retention. Indeed, quite a few invest substantial resources in programs designed to achieve that end. Some institutions even hire consultants who promise a proven formula for successful retention. But for all that effort, most institutions do not take student retention seriously. They treat student retention, like so many other issues, as one more item to add to the list of issues to be addressed by the institution. They adopt what Parker calls the "add a course" strategy in addressing the issues that face them. Need to address the issue of diversity? Add a course in diversity studies. Need to address the issue of student retention, in particular that of new students? Add a freshman seminar or perhaps a freshmen mentoring program. The result is that student experiences are increasingly segmented into smaller and smaller pieces; their relationships with faculty, staff, and each other becoming more narrow and specialized; their learning further partitioned into smaller disconnected segments.

Therefore while it is true that retention programs abound on our campuses, most institutions have not taken student retention seriously. They have done little to change the essential character of college, little to alter the prevailing character of student educational experience, and therefore little to address the deeper roots of student attrition. As a result, most efforts to enhance student retention, though successful to some degree, have had more limited impact than they should or could.

What would it mean for institutions to take student retention seriously? Among other things, institutions would stop tinkering at the margins of institutional life and make enhancing student retention the linchpin about which they organize their activities. They would move beyond the provision of add-on services and establish those educational conditions that promote the retention of all, not just some, students. To be serious about student retention, institutions would recognize that the roots

of attrition lie not only in their students and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings, now assumed to be natural to higher education, in which they ask students to learn.

What should those settings look like? What are the conditions that promote student retention? And how do they apply to new students during the critical first year of college when decisions to stay or leave are still unresolved? The good news is that we already know the answers to these questions. An extensive body of research identifies the *conditions* that best promote retention, in particular during the students' first year of college. Here the emphasis is on the conditions in which we place students rather than on the attributes of students themselves. Though some might argue otherwise, student attributes are, for the great majority of institutions, largely beyond immediate institutional control. This is not the case, however, for the settings, such as classrooms, laboratories, and residential halls, in which institutions place their students. Such settings are already within institutional control, their attributes already reflective of decisions made and of actions taken or not taken. They can be changed if institutions are serious in their pursuit of student retention.

## **Conditions for Student Retention**

Five conditions stand out as supportive of retention, namely expectation, advice, support, involvement, and learning.

First, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that expect them to succeed. High expectations are a condition for student success, or as is sometimes noted, “no one rises to low expectations.” Students, especially those who have been historically excluded from higher education, are affected by the campus expectational climate and by their perceptions of the expectations of faculty and staff hold for their individual performance. Unfortunately, too many institutions do not expect enough of their students, demand too little as regards student learning.

Second, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide clear and consistent information about institutional requirements and effective advising about the choices students have to make regarding their programs of study and future career goals. Students, especially the many who are undecided about their plans, need to understand the road map to completion and know how to use it to achieve personal goals. Least we forget

most students are either undecided at entry about their field of study or change their minds, at least once, during their college years.

Third, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide academic, social, and personal support. Most students, especially those in their first year of college, require some form of support. Some may require academic assistance, while others may need social or personal support. Support may be provided in structured forms such as in summer bridge programs, mentor programs, and student clubs or it may arise in the everyday workings of the institution such as in student contact with faculty and staff advisor. Whatever its form, support needs to be readily available and connected to other parts of student collegiate experience, not separated from it.

Fourth, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that involve them as valued members of the institution. The frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff, and other students is an important independent predictor of student persistence. This is true for large and small, rural and urban, public and private, and 2- and 4-year colleges and universities. It is true for women as well as men, students of color and anglo students, and part-time and full-time students. Simply put, involvement matters, and at no point does it matter more

than during the first year of college when student attachments are so tenuous and the pull of the institution so weak.

Fifth, and most importantly, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that foster learning. Learning has always been the key to student retention. Students who learn are students who stay. Institutions that are successful in building settings that educate their students are successful in retaining their students. Again, involvement seems to be the key. Students who are actively involved in learning, that is who spend more time on task especially with others, are more likely to learn and, in turn, more likely to stay.

Unfortunately, the educational experiences of most first-year students are not involving. Learning is still very much a spectator sport in which faculty talk dominates and where few students actively participate. Most first-year students experience learning as isolated learners whose learning is disconnected from that of others. Just as important, students typically take courses as detached, individual units, one course separated from another in both content and peer group, one set of understandings unrelated in any intentional fashion to the content learned in other courses. Though specific programs of study are designed for each major, courses have little academic or social coherence. It is small wonder that students seem so

uninvolved in learning. Their learning experiences are not very involving.

What should institutions do? How should they reorganize the first year of college and construct settings that promote student retention? How should they provide for needed information and advice, support, involvement, and learning? And how should they engage the majority of first-year students who work or commute to college? For these students, indeed for most students, the classroom may be the one, perhaps only place where they meet faculty and student peers, the one place where they engage in learning. For that reason, the settings we build to promote retention must include, indeed begin with the classrooms and laboratories of the campus.

### **Learning Communities: Reforming the First Year Experience**

For that reason, let me suggest that colleges and universities should make learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlies them the hallmark of the first year experience. They should ensure that shared learning is the norm, not the exception, of student first year experience.

Learning communities begin with a kind of co-registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together, rather than apart. In some cases,

learning communities will link students by tying two courses together, typically a course in writing with a course in selected literature or current social problems (Linked Courses). In other cases, it may mean sharing the entire first-semester curriculum so that students in the learning community study the same material throughout the semester. In some large universities such as the University of Oregon and the University of Washington, the twenty-five to thirty students in a learning community may attend lectures with 200-300 other students but stay together for a smaller discussion section, often called the Freshman Interest Group, led by a graduate student or upperclassman. In still other cases, students will take all their classes together either as separate, but linked, classes (Cluster Learning Communities) or as one large class that meets four to six hours at a time several times a week (Coordinated Studies).

The courses in which students co-register are not coincidental or random. They are typically connected by an organizing theme that gives meaning to their linkage. The point of doing so is to engender a coherent interdisciplinary or cross-subject learning that is not easily attainable through enrollment in unrelated, stand-alone courses. For example, a learning community entitled “Of Body and Mind” which links courses in Biology, Psychology, and Sociology, asks students to consider how the connected fields of study

pursue a singular piece of knowledge, namely how and why humans behave as they do.

Learning communities do more, however, than simply co-register students around a topic. In their fullest implementation, they also change the manner in which students are taught. Faculty alter their teaching and their classrooms to promote shared, collaborative learning experiences among students across the linked classrooms. This form of classroom organization requires students to work together in some form of collaborative groups and to become active, indeed responsible, for the learning of both group and classroom peers. In this way, students in learning communities are asked to share not only the curriculum, but also the experience of learning the curriculum.

The benefits for students are many (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, Engstrom, Hallock, and Riemer, 2001). Students are more likely to form their own self-supporting groups that extend beyond the classroom, more likely to spend more time together out of class than do students in traditional, stand-alone classes, and do so in ways that students see as supportive. More importantly, they spend more time learning together both inside and outside the classroom. As one student put it “class continues even after class.” As a result students learn more and as another student stated “they learn better together.”

By learning together, everyone's understanding and knowledge is, in the eyes of the participants, enriched. And, as students learn more and see themselves as more academically and socially engaged, their persistence is enhanced. Their involvement with others in learning within the classroom becomes the vehicle through which attachments are made and commitments to the institution engendered.

Learning communities are being used successfully in a variety of majors and fields of study and are being adapted to the needs of varying groups of students. For instance, they are being adapted to the needs of undecided students as well as those who require academic assistance. One of the linked courses may be a career exploration and/or developmental advising course or, in the latter case, a developmental level or study skills course. In residential campuses, some learning communities have moved into the residence halls. These “living learning communities” combine shared coursework with shared living. The power of these and other arrangements is that they enable the institution to integrate the provision of academic and social assistance to the social and academic needs of students in ways that is connected to their needs as learners.

It should be observed that one of the benefits of learning communities to the institution is that they provide an academic

structure within which collaboration among faculty and student affairs professionals is possible (Engstrom and Tinto, 2001). In many cases, such as those described above, the “faculty” of the learning community is made up of both academic and student affairs professional. For the learning community to succeed, they must work together to ensure that the linked courses provide a coherent, shared learning experience that is tailored to the needs of the students the community serves.

### **Reflections on Current Practice**

What then of the widely used first-year programs like the freshman seminar? If learning communities are to be the hallmark of the first year, what are institutions to make of their freshman seminars? Let me suggest that the answer lies not in the freshman seminar itself or in the many dedicated and talented faculty and staff who teach those seminars, but in the manner in which it is implemented. The freshman seminar and the important concepts that underlie it should be integrated into the very fabric of the first year. It should be linked to other courses as in a first-year learning community so that the activities that take place in the seminar are coherently connected to those that occur in the linked courses.

It is regrettable that too many institutions still use the freshman seminar as

a separate, stand-alone course unrelated to the academic life of the institution. In many respects it is employed as a type of educational vaccine. By leaving the freshman seminar at the margins of institutional life, by treating it as an add-on to the real business of the college, institutions implicitly assume that they can “cure” attrition by “inoculating” students with a dose of educational assistance without changing the rest of the curriculum and the ways students experience that curriculum. Unfortunately, like other add-ons, such strategies do little to reshape student academic experience and little to engender the needed questioning that it is beginning of educational reform.

The question institutions should ask is not whether they should have a seminar or for that matter any specific first year program, but with the question “what should be the educational character of the first year of college?” Only after answering this question, should one then ask if a freshman seminar or any other program is necessary. If the answer to that question is yes, only then should the question be asked as to the character of that seminar or program. Unfortunately, too many colleges still ask only if they should have a freshman seminar and thereby separate out discussions about the character of the freshman seminar from the much needed conversation about the educational character of the first year of college, indeed

of the character of collegiate education generally. Yet it is that conversation that is so lacking in higher education today and when held so monochromic in nature.

That is why learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlies them are so appealing. Unlike other retention programs that sit at the margins of student academic experience, learning communities when applied as part and parcel of the first year experience seek to transform that experience and thereby address the deeper roots of student retention. And it does so in ways that challenge the prevailing discourse on campus by seeking to include faculty and staff across the campus in that discourse. In effect, they take student learning and retention seriously.

## References

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