

Taking Student Retention Seriously: Rethinking the First Year of College*

Vincent Tinto
Syracuse University

Many colleges speak of the importance of increasing student retention. Many even invest substantial resources in programs to achieve that end. Witness, for instance, the growth of the freshman seminar. Some institutions even go so far as to hire retention consultants who promise significant gains in retention if only you use their programs. But while many colleges have adopted a variety of programs to enhance retention, most programs are add-ons that are marginal to the academic life of the institution. Too many colleges have adopted what Parker Palmer calls the “add a course” strategy. Need to address the issue of diversity? Add a course in diversity studies. Need to address the success of new students? Add a freshman seminar. Need to address student retention? Bring in a consultant and establish a committee or office charged with that responsibility. The result is a growing segmentation of services for students into increasingly autonomous fiefdoms whose functional responsibilities are reinforced by separate budget and promotion systems. Therefore, while it is true that retention programs abound on our campuses, most institutions, in my view, have not taken student retention seriously. They have done little to change the way they organize their activities, done little to alter student experience, and therefore done little to address the deeper roots of student attrition. As a result, most efforts at enhancing student retention, though successful to some degree, have had more limited impact than they should or could.

What would it mean for an institution to take student retention seriously? Among other things, it would mean that institutions stop tinkering at the margins of institutional life and make enhancing student retention the linchpin about which they organize their activities. It would mean that institutions move beyond the “adding-on” of services by recognizing that the roots of attrition lies not only in their students but also in the very character of the settings in which they ask their students to learn; settings which are now taken for granted as “natural” to higher education.

How might these settings change? What would our colleges and universities look like if we used the research on student retention to guide our actions? That is if we took student retention seriously. And what would they look like in first year of college when student persistence is so much in question?

The good news is that we already know the answer to these questions. The extensive body of research on student retention tells us of the conditions that best promote student retention during the first year of college. By stressing conditions, I mean to distinguish between the attributes of individuals who enter our colleges and the character of the settings in which we

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ask them to persist and graduate. Though some might argue otherwise, I assume that student attributes are largely beyond institutional control or at least beyond our capacity to substantially alter them in the short run. This is clearly not the case for the settings in which students are placed. Those settings, classrooms, laboratories, residential halls, and the like, are directly under our control and are, if we so wish, subject to change by our actions. By focusing therefore on the conditions in which we place students we are necessarily led to the sorts of changes we can and should make to enhance student retention. That is if we are serious about that goal.

Well what about the research? What does it tell us about the conditions which foster student retention? First, it tells us that students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that take advising seriously; that provide clear, consistent, and easily accessible information about institutional requirements, that help students understand the roadmap to completion, and help them understand how they use that roadmap to decide upon and achieve personal goals. Second, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide support - academic, social, and personal - in ways which is both available and connected to other parts of their collegiate experience. Third, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that involve them as valued members of the institution. Frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff, and students has repeatedly been shown to be an *independent* predictor of student persistence. This is true for large and small colleges, rural and urban colleges, public and private colleges, and for two and four-year colleges and universities. It is true for women as well as men, for students of color as well as for anglo students, and for part-time as well as full time students. Simply put, involvement matters and at no point does it matter more than during the first year when student attachments are so tenuous and the pull of the institution so weak. Finally and most importantly, the research tells us that student learning is the root of student persistence. Students who learn, are students who stay. Institutions that are successful in building settings that educate their students, all students, not just some, are institutions that are successful in retaining their students.

The research in this regard could not be clearer. Students who find support for their learning, receive frequent feedback about their learning and are actively involved in learning, especially with others, are more likely to learn and in turn more likely to stay. Unfortunately, it remains the case that most first year students experience learning as isolated learners whose learning is disconnected from that of others. They continue to engage in solo performance and demonstration in what remains a largely show-and-tell learning environment. Their experience of learning is still very much a "spectator sport" in which faculty talk dominates and where there are few active student participants. It is little wonder then that students seem so uninvolved in learning. Their learning experiences are not very involving.

Well, what should institutions do? How should they reorganize the first year of college? What settings would they build to provide the information, support, involvement and learning so necessary for persistence? And how would they so do for the many first-year students who work, and/or commute to college?

Again, there is good news. An increasing number of colleges and universities have begun to successfully employ a variety of practices and pedagogies that seek to actively involve students in learning with others. Among these are cooperative or collaborative learning, problem-based learning, classroom assessment, service learning, and, one of my favorites, learning communities.

I want to spend a few minutes describing learning communities because I view them as a particularly powerful way of not only actively involving our students in learning, but also of promoting a deeper and richer learning than is typical of the college experience. At the same time, research shows that they can have a significant impact on both learning and persistence.

Learning communities, in their most basic form, 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 which 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, the Coordinated Studies Program at Seattle Central Community College entitled "Presentation of Race in America" which links courses in US History, Communications, and Writing, asks students to consider and write about how images of the African-American have been presented in the media over the course of US History.

Many learning communities do more than co-register students around a topic. They change the manner in which students experience the curriculum and the way they are taught. Faculty have reorganized their syllabi and their classrooms teaching practices to promote shared, collaborative learning experiences among students. Students are required to work together in some form of collaborative group and become active, indeed responsible, for the learning of both group and classroom peers. In this way, students are asked to share both the curriculum and the learning of the curriculum.

Though the content may vary, nearly all the learning communities have three things in common. One is *shared knowledge*. By requiring students to take courses together and

organizing those courses around a theme, learning communities seek to construct a shared, coherent curricular experience that is not just an unconnected array of courses. In doing so, they seek to promote higher levels of cognitive complexity that cannot easily be obtained through participation in unrelated courses. The second is *shared knowing*. Learning communities enroll the same students in several classes so they get to know each other quickly and fairly intimately and in a way that is part and parcel of their academic experience. By asking students to construct knowledge together, learning communities seek to involve students both socially and intellectually in ways that promote cognitive development as well as an appreciation for the many ways in which one's own knowing is enhanced when other voices are part of that learning experience. The third is *shared responsibility*. Learning communities which employ collaborative learning strategies ask students to become responsible to each other in the process of trying to know. They participate in collaborative groups which require students to be mutually dependent on one another so that the learning of the group does not advance without each member doing her or his part.

As a curricular structure, learning communities can be applied to any content and any group of students. Most often, they are designed for the needs of beginning students. In those instance, one of the linked courses may be a Freshman Seminar. Increasingly, they are also being adapted to the needs of undecided students and students who require developmental academic assistance. In these cases, one of the linked courses may be a career exploration and/or developmental advising course or, in the latter case, a “learning to learn” or study skills course. One or more courses may also be developmental in character. In residential campuses, some learning communities have moved into the residence halls. These “living learning communities” combine shared courses with shared living. Students typically enroll in a number of linked courses and living together in a reserved part of a residence hall.

When applied to particular groups of students, as described above, the “faculty” of the learning community almost always combine the work of both academic and student affairs professionals. Such learning communities call for, indeed require, the collaborative efforts of both parties. This is the case because the staff of student affairs are typically the only persons on campus who possess the skills and knowledge needed to teach some of the linked courses. Take the case of learning communities for undecided students or first year students. The “faculty” of such learning communities often involve both academic faculty, professional academic advisors, and other student affairs professionals.

One of the many benefits of such collaboration is that faculty come to “discover” the wealth of knowledge that advisors and other student affairs professionals bring to the discourse about teaching and learning. In leaving their respective silos both come to discover the many benefits of looking at one’s work from other perspectives.

Research on learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlies them serves to highlight the ways they enhance student learning and persistence. First, students in learning communities tend to form their own self-supporting groups which extend beyond the

classroom. Learning community students spend more time together out of class than do students in traditional, unrelated stand-alone classes and they do so in ways which students see as supportive. Indeed, some students at the urban colleges see those groups as critical to their ability to continue in college. Listen to the voice of one student we interviewed a year later who reflected back upon her experience in a learning community.

Second, learning community students become more actively involved in classroom learning, even after class. They spend more time learning together both inside and outside the class. In this way, learning communities enable students to bridge the divide between academic classes and student social conduct that frequently characterizes student life. They tend to learn and make friends at the same time. And as students spend more time together learning, they learn more. Hear the voice of another student as he talks about his experience in a learning community.

Third, as students learn more and see themselves as more engaged both academically and socially, they persist at a substantially higher rate than do comparable students in the traditional curriculum. At Seattle Central Community College, for example, learning community students continue at a rate approximately twenty-five percentage points higher than do students in the traditional curriculum.

Fourth, participation in the learning community seems to enhance the quality of student learning. By learning together everyone's understanding and knowledge is, in the eyes of the participants, enriched. As this student puts it "We not only learn more, we learn better."

Finally, student participants' stories highlight powerful messages about the value of collaborative learning settings in fostering what could be called "the norms of educational citizenship," that is to say norms which promote the notion that individual educational welfare is tied inexorably to the educational welfare of other members of the community. Students in these programs report an increased sense of responsibility to participate in the learning experience and an awareness of their responsibility for the learning of others.

Learning communities do not represent a "magic bullet" to student learning and persistence. There are no "magic bullets." Like any other curricular and pedagogical reform, there are limits to what it can achieve. Some students do not like learning with others and some faculty find collaborating with other faculty and staff difficult. Some students because of their schedules cannot easily enroll in learning communities. Nevertheless, like other efforts to enhance student involvement through shared learning, such as collaborative and cooperative teaching, there is ample evidence to support the contention that shared learning settings do enhance student learning and persistence and enrich faculty professional lives.

For us here today, one of the important characteristics of learning communities is that they provide an academic structure within which faculty and student affairs collaboration is possible, indeed often required. Moreover, they can serve as a vehicle through which a range

of services can be provided to all first year students in ways which are connected to their daily educational experiences.

More importantly, they are a type of organizational reform that is rooted in the classroom, the one place, perhaps only place, students meet each other and the faculty, and the one place for which we as faculty and student affairs professionals have responsibility. As such they are available to all students, faculty, and staff. And unlike other retention programs that sit at the margins of student academic experience, they seek to transform that experience and thereby address the deeper roots of student retention. Learning communities take student learning and retention seriously. So should our institutions.

So what should the first year of college be like? How might we organize that year if we were seriously about enhancing student retention?

One thing we would do is ensure that shared learning is a norm, not exception, of student first year experience. We would move to see to it that all students have the opportunity to learn together and do so in ways that promote a deeper, richer learning. Too much of student experience is isolating both socially and intellectually. Little wonder that evidence point to the relative lack of student involvement in learning.

If we were serious about student retention, we would also make the assessment of student learning matter. Though I do not have the time to explore this issue this afternoon, let me point out that I am not referring just to testing, but to a range of assessment activities ranging from entry assessments of student skills to within classroom assessments such as those described by Tom Angelo and Patricia Cross that provide students as well as faculty frequent feedback about student learning. It is clear that students learn best when they are provided frequent feedback about their learning as they are trying to learn.

We would also move to connect academic support for students to the classroom and to the other places in which students are trying to learn. The use of supplemental study groups or the connecting of support through a linked class or seminar are but two possibilities. Unfortunately, too many of our efforts to support students are disconnected from student daily educational needs. As a result, much of our work goes unheeded.

Finally, I think we need to reconsider how we employ the Freshman Seminar. The important concepts that underlie the freshman seminar should be integrated into the very fabric of the first year. The seminar should not be left at the margins of institutional life, its ideas treated as add-ons to the “real business” of the college. Too frequently the freshman seminar is treated as a type of vaccine that we hope will make the students immune to the many dangers of the freshman year. Unfortunately, by isolating the seminar from the curriculum, students tend to discount the seminar and its activities as unimportant when in fact it is. One obvious possibility, among several, is to link the freshman seminar to other courses in a first year

learning community so that students experience the freshman seminar in ways that are connected to their everyday learning experiences.

Let me observe that too many colleges and universities begin conversations about the freshman seminar by asking about the type of seminar they should adopt. Unfortunately, that is not the place to begin. Rather than being the first question they ask, it should be the last of a series of questions they pose about the first year. The proper way to begin is with the more general question of what should be the character of the first year of college. After answering that question, the question should then be asked whether a freshman seminar is needed and if the answer is affirmative, then and only then, should the question be posed about the type of seminar to be offered. My point is simple. The freshman seminar is enhanced when it is part of a broader conversation about how the first year of college should be structured to best promote the retention of students.

In that regard, let me close by arguing that the first year of college should be understood as a developmental year in which new students acquire the skills, dispositions, and norms needed to learn and grow throughout the college years. As such, it should be able to stand on its own grounds as a distinct institutional response to the question “How should the first year of college be structured to best promote student learning in that year and beyond?” Perhaps we should revisit the concept of the University College; in this case a college constructed just for first year students with its own faculty, staff, and administration. Such colleges, for example like those being developed at Indiana University - Purdue University at Indianapolis and at the University of Southern Maine, can provide the organizational environment within which collaborative partnerships between academic and student affairs professionals are valued and creative responses to the question of the first year are encouraged.

Finally, if we were truly serious about promoting the retention of all, not just some, of our students, the first year of college should be a year where no student, faculty, or staff would be required to “show a badge” of belonging. It should be a year of inclusion which promotes the important ideal that all persons can and should have a voice in the construction of knowledge. All persons should have the opportunity to complete their college degrees. Increasing student retention is not enough if we do not also close the gaps in persistence and graduation that now divide different segments of our society. In can and must do more. Thank you.