

Student Retention: What Next? *

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Introduction:

This morning I will speak to what we must do next to more effectively address the continuing problem of student attrition in higher education. To do so I will briefly look back on what is now a thirty-year history of research & practice on student retention and reflect on the lessons we have learned over that time. I will argue that we have yet to attend to the deeper educational issues that ultimately shape student success in higher education. Until we do so, our efforts will always be less effective than we desire.

Student Retention: Then

When I first became interested in student retention, now some thirty-seven years ago, student attrition was viewed through the lens of psychology. Student retention or the lack thereof was seen as the reflection of individual attributes, skills, and motivation. Students who did not stay were viewed as less able, less motivated, and less willing to defer the benefits that college graduation was believed to bestow. Students failed, not institutions. This is what we now refer to as blaming the victim.

This view of retention began to change in the 70's. As part of a broader change in how we understood the relationship between individuals and society, our view of student retention also shifted to take account of the role of the environment, in particular the institution, in student decisions to stay or leave. Though I was not the first to argue for this shift, my 1975 article and in turn my book, *Leaving College*, was the first to lay out a longitudinal model that made explicit connections between the

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environment, in this case the academic and social systems of the institution and the individuals who shaped those systems, and student retention over different periods of time. Central to this model was the concept of integration and the patterns of interaction between the student and other members of the institution especially during the critical first year of college and the stages of transition that marked that year.

This early work on student retention ushered in what might be called the “age of involvement.” Research, most notably by Alexander Astin, Ernest Pascarella, and Patrick Terenzini, served to reinforce the importance of student contact or involvement to a range of student outcomes not the least of which was student retention. We learned that involvement matters. And we learned that it matters most during the critical first year of college.

As a result, much of our early practice focused on the first year, especially the transition to college, and the nature of student contact with faculty, most notably the outside the classroom. We rushed into service a range of contact/transition programs ranging from expanded and extended orientation, freshman seminars, and a variety of extracurricular programs such as “take a faculty out to dinner” – just what every 18 year old looks forward to in coming to college.

Like any early body of work, the study of student retention lacked complexity and detail. Much of the early work was drawn from quantitative studies of largely residential universities and students of majority backgrounds. As such it did not, in its initial formulation, speak to the experience of students in other types of institutions, two and four-year, and of students of different gender, race, ethnicity, income, and orientation. We were, if you will, in the infancy of our work.

The same can be said of our practice. At the outset, much of the real work of retaining students fell on the shoulders of student affairs professionals who sought to provide students the assistance they needed to persist. This was most noticeable in the types of first-year programs established at the time, in particular the freshman seminar. Faculty were largely absent. As a result, most retention activities were appended to, rather than integrated within, the

mainstream of institutional academic life. Retention activities were then, as they are in some measure today, add-ons to existing university activity.

Student Retention: Now

Since that time, the study and practice of student retention has undergone a number of changes. First, our understanding of the experience of students of different backgrounds has been greatly enhanced as has our appreciation of how a broader array of forces, cultural, social, and institutional, shape student retention. Take for instance the research on the retention of under-represented students and the so-called stages of departure. Whereas we once assumed that retention required students to break away from past communities, we now know that for some students the ability to remain connected to their past communities, family, church, or tribe, is essential to their persistence.

Second we have come to understand how the process of student retention differs in different institutional settings, residential and non-residential, two and four-year. As we studied persistence in non-residential settings, for instance, we have come to appreciate, as we did not before, the importance of involvement in the classroom to student retention. This is the case because the classroom is, for many students, the one place, perhaps only place, where they meet each other and the faculty. If involvement does not occur there, it is unlikely to occur elsewhere.

Third, as we learned more about the complexity of student retention, we have come to appreciate the limits of our early models of retention. We now have a range of models, some sociological, some psychological, and others economic in nature that have been proposed as being better suited to the task of explaining student leaving. Indeed there are now several edited volumes dedicated solely to comparing these models.

Throughout these changes and the putting forth of alternative models, one fact has remained clear. Involvement, or what is increasingly being referred to as engagement, matters.

Less clear is how to make involvement matter and how to make it matter in different settings in ways that enhances the retention of all students, not just some.

This realization, together with the challenges of declining enrollments, lead to what is now a heightened focus on “what works.” Though my own research on learning communities is far from the only study of effective practice, it is the first to clearly link educational innovations that shape classroom practice both to heightened forms of engagement and to student persistence. In doing so, it established what is now a widely accepted notion that the actions of the faculty, especially in the classroom, are key to institutional efforts to enhance student retention. Though it is true, as you are often reminded, that student retention is everyone’s business, it is the business of the faculty in particular. Regrettably, too few faculty see this to be the case.

Student retention has now become big business. We now have a number of consulting firms that promote their ability to increase institutional retention rates. Each seems to have discovered the secret to student retention. There are conferences, volumes, and even journals dedicated to student retention. There are surveys of student engagement, instruments that measure “dropout proneness,” and even institutional retention audits. Many states now use some measure of institutional retention and graduation rates in their accountability programs. Several organizations and at least one well-known news magazine now rank institutions and in some cases states, by some measure of retention. Even the Federal government is considering using institutional retention rates in a national system of higher educational accountability. Clearly student retention now matters more than ever.

Student Retention: What Next

Well then, what lessons have we learned from the now thirty-year focus on student retention? And what do these lessons tell us about what we must do next to further enhance our ability to promote student retention on our campuses?

This morning I want to focus on three key lessons. These have to do with implementation, inclusion, and income.

The first lesson of implementation can be broadly stated as follows: It is one thing to identify effective action; it is another to implement it in ways that significantly enhance student retention over time. This lesson can be broken down into two corollary lessons. First, it is one thing to identify effective action; it is another to implement it fully. Second, it is one thing to begin a program; it is another to see it endure.

The regrettable fact is that many good ideas are not well implemented. Sometimes good programs are not fully implemented or not implemented correctly. This, by the way, is one of the hurdles that confront the learning community movement. Too many institutions stop at co-registration and do not pursue the pedagogical and curriculum changes that full learning communities require.

In other cases, even when fully implemented, many programs do not endure. After a few years, like other efforts before them, they fade away typically with the departure of the originators of the effort or of a supportive administrator. Programs begin but often fail to garner the broader institutional support needed to endure.

That this is the case is in part related to assessment or to be more precise the failure of assessment. Unfortunately too few retention programs pay heed to the importance of assessment and the ways assessment can be used to demonstrate the cost effectiveness of their programs. The hard truth is that there are many programs, retention or otherwise, that make claims upon institutional resources. In such circumstances, retention programs have to provide empirical evidence that resources committed to them are an investment that yields long-term benefits to the institution. Failing to do so undermines their ability to generate the sorts of long-term funding that is essential to program institutionalization.

So my advice! Incorporate on-going assessment, both formative and summative, into program functioning and pay attention to the various audiences, administrative, faculty, legislative or otherwise, with whom assessment data must be shared.

The second lesson is one of inclusion. It can be stated as follows: It is one thing to establish a program; it is another to integrate it into the fabric of institutional life.

Even among programs that endure, too many do so at the margins of institutional life. They fail to gain access to the mainstream of institutional academic life and as a result are limited in their impact.

The truth of the matter is that while many institutions tout the importance of increasing student retention, not enough take student retention seriously. Too few are willing to commit needed resources and address the deeper structural issues that ultimately shape student persistence. They are willing to append retention efforts to their ongoing activities, much less willing to alter those activities in ways that address the deeper roots of student attrition.

There are numerous reasons why this is the case. Perhaps the most important is that increasing student retention is not high on everyone's list of priorities, in particular that of the faculty. While most faculty are willing to publicly proclaim the importance of retaining each and every student, privately they are the first to argue, on university campuses at least, that they will not get promoted and tenured unless they get grants and publish. Helping students persist is fine, but not at the expense of one's career. Of course such views are at least partially reflective of institutional priorities that shape promotion and tenure. As many of you here are only too well aware there is "prestige creep" going about the nation. Seemingly every university wants to be the next major research university.

The root of the problem, however, is deeper than just those of institutional and faculty priorities. It lies in the very character of our discourse, the ways we talk about our work, indeed how we think of our work. It lies if you will in the very language of student retention. Like me

make a modest proposal. We should stop using the R word, especially when talking to faculty. And by all means, please refrain from talking to faculty about students as consumers.

Why? Unfortunately, too many faculty see the issue of student retention as primarily a reflection of student abilities and/or motivation. They would say, at least privately, “if the institution only gave me good students, I would not have a retention problem.” Putting aside the fact that this view of the causes of student attrition is mistaken, the problem is that as long as faculty believe this to be the case they do not associate their actions with the solution to student retention. Rather they see it as the business of student affairs professionals, in particular the staff of the learning center. Yet that is precisely the problem with too many of our programs, they are solely the work of student affairs and not that of the faculty. As a result programs continue to sit at the margins of academic life.

To address this problem we have to stop using the R word. Instead we should speak of student education and frame our efforts as part of the broader educational mission of the institution for that is the precisely the work of the faculty. Their job is not retaining students it’s educating students. If they attend to the latter, the former will follow of its own accord.

The irony is that the faculty of our universities and colleges are, as a matter of practice, the only faculty from kindergarten through universities who are literally not trained to teach their students - the students the wish they had as well as the students they do have. Nor are our universities and colleges well structured to promote student learning. They are organized around faculty interests, not about student learning.

What’s my point? As we move forward, we must join forces with a growing educational movement that seeks to address issues of student learning and restructure our colleges and universities to better promote that goal. In a very real sense our work is not student retention it is institutional restructuring.

This is why I have long championed curricular and pedagogical restructuring efforts such learning communities. Not only do such communities enhance student learning and retention,

they also provide a framework within which academic and student affairs can join forces on behalf of student education. It is that joint effort that we must pursue.

The third lesson of income has to do with the critical issue of equity. It can be stated as follows: Though we have seen increases in institutional rates of retention, increases among low-income students have yet to follow suit.

The data are clear. While access to higher education for low-income students has increased and gaps in access between groups decreased, the gap between well-to-do and poor students in college completion remains. Indeed it appears to have increased over time.

Among students who begin in a two-year college, for instance, nearly 25 percent of high-income students earn a four-year degree within six years, but only 8 percent of low-income students do so. And this remains the case even after one takes account of differences in prior academic preparation and educational aspirations.

Similar differences exist among four-year college entrants. Only 48 percent of low-income students who begin in a public four-year college or university earn their four-year degree within six years while 67 percent of high-income students do so. More telling still is the fact that even among those who begin at a four-year college with the stated goal of obtaining at least a four-year degree, only a little over half of low-income students earn a Bachelor's degree as compared to over three quarters of high-income students. More importantly a recent study by the U.S. Department of Education reveals that the gap in graduation rates between low and high-income students has increased over the past decade. Clearly our efforts at increasing retention are not working for low-income students.

What is to be done? What is not to be done is doing more of the same. Take the case of academically under-prepared low-income students. As part of a multi-year study of innovative developmental education programs funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, we have been studying the impact of innovative

developmental education learning communities on the success of academically under-prepared low-income students in both two and four-year colleges.

Our findings to date are telling. We learned that it is possible to address student learning needs in college and enhance persistence. But doing so requires both curricular and pedagogical changes and the willingness of faculty and staff to collaborate in ways that provide students a coherently linked set of activities and support that further student education. Three changes stand out.

- First, programs must coherently link developmental education and study skills courses to content courses. Such linkages make possible the immediate application of skills learned in a developmental education course to what is being learned in the course to which it is linked. This is what practitioners in the field refer to as contextualizing academic support.
- Second, programs must employ collaborative and/or cooperative pedagogies that require that students learn together in a coherent interdependent manner. Students who learn together become more academically and socially engaged, that is they spend more time together and on task, learn more, and in turn persist more frequently.
- Third, programs must connect classroom activities to support services on campus as occurs, for instance, when counselors and/or advisors participate in the learning community. Developmental education learning communities are most effective when they serve as conduits to other support services that low-income students might not otherwise access.

By describing our research at Syracuse University, I hope to make a rather simple point, namely to address the success of low-income students within our colleges and universities, especially those from underserved populations, we must stop tinkering at the margins of institutional life, stop our tendency to take an “add-on” approach to institutional innovation, stop marginalizing our efforts and in turn our students, and adopt efforts that restructure the learning environments in which we place them. We must take their learning seriously

In closing, let me observe that we have traveled a long way since we first began working on the issue of student retention. We have learned much and have become more sophisticated in our thinking about how to promote persistence for different students and in different settings. But, as the data reveal, it is a journey that has only begun; the really difficult work has yet to be tackled. That work requires us to leave our retention fiefdoms and join forces with a larger educational movement that seeks to restructure the way we go about the task of educating all our students. It is to that educational task that we, you and I, must now move.

Thank you.