

Promoting Student Retention Through Classroom Practice^{*}

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Introduction

Many universities in the United States speak of the importance of increasing student retention. Indeed, quite a few invest substantial resources in programs designed to achieve that end. Some universities even hire consultants who promise a proven formula for successful retention. But for all that effort, most universities 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 university. They adopt what Parker Palmer 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.

Though helpful, such add-ons do little to change the essential character of university experience, 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 in the United States have had more limited impact than they should or could.

What would it mean for universities to take student retention seriously? Among other things, universities 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 conditions within universities that promote the retention of all, not just some, students. To be serious about student retention, universities must recognize that the roots of attrition lie not only in their

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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. To be serious about student retention, universities would recognize that they have to do more than establish programs to help the students adjust to the institution. Though such programs are helpful, being serious about student retention would mean that universities would also initiate changes in their own structures and practices to better meet the needs of their changing student body.

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 institutions place students rather than on the attributes of students themselves. For unlike student attributes that are largely fixed at entry the conditions in which students seek to learn and persist, such as classrooms, are not. They 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 are known to promote persistence. These are expectations, support, feedback, 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 (Fleming, 1984; Rendon, 1994; Hurtado and Carter, 1996).

Second, 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.

Third, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide frequent and early feedback about their performance as they are trying to learn and persist. The use of early warning systems, classroom assessment techniques, and frequent mini-exams all have the impact of providing students much needed information about their performance so that they can adjust their performance in order to persist.

Fourth, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that involve them as valued members of the institution (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993). The frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff, and other students is an important independent predictor of student persistence. This has been shown to hold 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 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 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 (Tinto, 2000). 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 (Tinto, 1997).

Nowhere is involvement more important than in the classrooms of the university, the one place, perhaps only place, students meet each other and the faculty, and engage in learning. For that reason the centerpiece of any university policy to enhance retention must begin with the classrooms and serve to reshape classroom practice in ways that more fully involve students in learning, especially with other students.

Promoting Involvement in Learning

There are a number of classroom practices that universities in the United States have utilized for this purpose. Among the more popular are cooperative and/or collaborative learning, problem-based learning, learning communities, supplemental instruction, and service learning. Though different, each has the common characteristic of requiring students to learn together, typically in small groups, in ways that call for students to reflect on their learning and become responsible for their own learning as well as that of their peers.

As part of a multi-million dollar research project, my staff and I at Syracuse University studied a range of such initiatives, in particular cooperative and collaborative learning, and learning communities that we being used by innovative programs across the country. We employed both longitudinal survey methods and qualitative interview and focus group methods and compared the experiences of students in classrooms that had adopted those practices to students in more traditional lecture classrooms. What we found reinforced the fact that student retention is very much a reflection of the conditions in which students find themselves, in particular those that shape involvement in learning in the classroom.

I would like to very briefly share with you some of the data from our study. First a quote that was typical of students in the programs we studied. Here the student expresses his understanding of how his involvement with his peers within the classroom enhances his learning, even after class.

“You know the more I talk to other people about the class stuff, the homework, the tests, the more I’m actually learning... I learn more about the subject because my brain is getting more, because I am getting more involved with other students in the class ... I’m getting more involved with the class even after class.”

In another quote from a student in a program that was very diverse in student makeup, we heard this view:

“I think more people should be educated in this form of education... We learn not only how to interact with ourselves, but with other people of different races, different sizes, different colors, different everything... I mean it just makes it better... not only do you learn more, you learn better.”

We also measured their perceptions of intellectual gain and what is referred to as Quality of Student Effort. It is a composite measure that assesses student effort (time-on-task) on a range of behaviors each of which is predictive of learning and persistence. In the chart, which compares the average scores of students in the innovative programs and in the traditional comparison settings, you can see that students in these innovative classroom settings were more involved on all measures of student effort and saw themselves as having made greater intellectual gain.

| Effort Score* | Program | Comparison |
|----------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Course Effort | 3.05* | 2.46 |
| Library Usage | 2.15* | 1.94 |
| Faculty Contact | 2.25* | 1.99 |
| Student Contact | 3.12* | 2.85 |
| Writing Effort | 2.81* | 2.65 |
| Perceived Gain | 2.68* | 2.46 |

* Scores on a four-point scale from 1(low) to 4 (high)

* Indicates a significant difference between groups at the .05 level

Finally, we compared the retention rates of the two groups averaged over all the institutions we studied. As you tell, students in these programs had higher retention rates, slightly over 57 percent, than did the comparison group students whose average retention was a little over 41 percent.

Closing Thoughts

Do these classroom practices work? Yes. They enhance student involvement, enrich student learning experiences, and in turn improve retention. They are particularly effective when they are connected to other student support programs, as for example when one of the courses in a learning community is a study skills course¹. Are these practices perfect? Nothing is perfect. Like any other innovation, there are costs to their adoption and limits to what they can achieve. Not the least of these is the burden they place on faculty, many of whom have never been trained to teach. Nevertheless, evidence from studies like these add weight to the argument that to increase student retention we have to begin changing the university, its structure and practices, in particular those in the classroom. We have to move beyond the adding-on of services, often at the margins of university life, to the reshaping of student classroom experience and do so in ways that build powerful educational communities of engagement for all, not just some, of our students.

Thank you.

¹ This is sometimes referred to as “contextualizing” academic assistance and support; that is when support to students is provided in a way that directly relates to what students have to do to be successful in the classroom and other learning settings.

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