

# Taking Student Retention Seriously: Rethinking the First Year of University\*

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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 institutions even hire consultants who promise a proven formula for successful retention. But for all that effort, most universities, in my view, 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 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, but do not change the prevailing values on campus that underlie the experience of diverse groups on campus. Need to address the issue of student retention, in particular that of new students? Add a course, such as an orientation course, to help new students persist but do not change the prevailing nature of the first year experience. This does not mean that such courses cannot be helpful. Research has demonstrated that they can. Nor does it mean that individual action cannot improve retention somewhat. They can. But such add-ons actions that sit at the margins of institutional life do little to change the overall character of university life, little to alter the prevailing conditions on campus that shape student educational experience, and therefore little to address the deeper roots of student attrition. Therefore while it is true that retention programs abound on our campuses, most universities have not taken student success seriously. As a result, most efforts to enhance student retention, though successful to some degree, have had more limited impact than they could or should.

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What would it mean for universities to take student retention seriously? First and foremost it would mean that they would stop tinkering at the margins of university academic 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 on campus that promote the retention of all, not just some, students. To be serious about student retention, universities would recognize that the roots of student attrition lie not only in their students and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings in which they ask students to learn, namely the classrooms, laboratories, and studios of the campus. They would recognize that student learning is the key to student retention and by extension realize that the involvement of academics, not just learning advisors, is critical to institutional efforts to increase student retention.

What should those educational settings look like? What are the conditions within universities that promote student learning and in turn student retention? And how do they apply to new students during the critical first year of university 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 educational conditions that best promote learning and retention, in particular during the students' first year of university when student learning and persistence are still much in question. Here the emphasis is on the educational 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 universities in the United States 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 and not taken. They can be changed if universities are serious in their pursuit of student retention.

## **Conditions for Student Success**

Four conditions stand out as supportive of student success, namely expectations, support, feedback, and involvement.

First, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that hold high and clear expectations for student achievement. Students need to know what to expect about the sorts of actions they must take to succeed in the university. This holds for the university generally; for area in which they major; and for the classrooms in which they seek to learn and succeed. At the same time, students need to be held to high expectations. Simply put no one rises to low expectations. Unfortunately it is too often the case that universities expect too little of their students, ask to little of them as regards the effort they must expend to succeed in particular in the classroom. In this regard it is disappointing to say the least that in the United States data from the National Survey of Student Engagement indicate that student expectations for the amount of work they have to do to succeed in the university declines over the course of the first year of university.

Second, support is a condition that promotes student retention. Research points to several types of support that promote retention, in particular academic and social support. Unfortunately, more than a few students enter the university insufficiently prepared for the rigors of university study. For them, as well as for others, the availability of academic support for instance in the form of basic skill courses, tutoring, study groups, and academic support programs such as supplemental instruction, or what you typically refer to as peer assisted study sessions, is an important condition for their continuation in the university. So also is the availability of social support in the form of counseling, mentoring, and ethnic student centers. Such centers provide much needed support for individual students and a safe haven for groups of students who might otherwise find themselves out of place in a setting where they are a distinct minority. For new students, these centers can serve as secure, knowable ports of entry that enable students to safely navigate the unfamiliar terrain of the university.

It should be observed that academic support is most effective when it is connected to students' daily learning needs in ways that enable students to utilize the support they receive to learn and succeed in the classrooms in which they are enrolled. It is for this reason that programs like supplemental instruction and basic skills learning communities are so effective and why it is so important for universities to align the actions of professional staff with those of academics.

Third, feedback is a condition for student success. Students are more likely to succeed in settings in which information about student progress is not only collected but feedback to teachers, staff, and students in forms that enable them to use that information to promote student success. Here I refer not only to entry assessment of learning skills and the placement that should follow, but also to early warning systems that alert universities to students who need assistance so that assistance can be provided early enough to make a difference. An important attribute of such systems is that they are connected to classroom learning and are early. This is the case because student attrition has its own momentum such that the longer one waits to intervene the more difficult it is to make a difference.

Feedback also takes the form of classroom assessment techniques such as those described by Thomas Angelo and Patricia Cross and those that involve the use of learning portfolios. These techniques are not to be confused with testing but with forms of assessment, such as the well-known "one-minute" paper, that provide both students and teachers information on what is or is not being learned in the classroom. When used frequently, such techniques enable students and teachers alike to adjust their learning and teaching in ways that promote learning. Just as importantly, early and frequent feedback about student performance, in particular during the first year of study, can be used to trigger the provision of support in ways that enable students to continue their studies.

Finally, but no less importantly, involvement or what is now commonly referred to as engagement is a condition for student success. The more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely are they to persist and graduate. At no time does involvement matter more than in the critical first year of university study when student

success is still so much in question and no where it is more important than in the classrooms of that year for it is there that success is constructed, one class at a time. Many students work and/or commute to the university. For them the classroom may be the only place where they meet each other and their teachers and engage in formal learning activities. If involvement does not occur there, it is unlikely to occur elsewhere. This is but one reason why the work of academics and discussions of curriculum design as we are having at this conference are so important for they help shape the learning activities that occur in the classroom.

Least we forget the object of student retention is not merely that student stay, but that they learn in staying. Education, not mere retention, is the proper goal of institutional action. Retention and graduation are its byproducts. This is but one reason why pedagogies of engagement such as cooperate and problem-based learning, service learning, and initiatives such learning communities have been shown to be particularly effective in enhancing student success in that year and have, in the United States, become increasingly common attributes of effective first year programs.

To sum up, students are more likely to persist, learn, and graduate when they find themselves in settings that hold high expectations for their learning, provide needed academic and social support and frequent feedback about their learning, and actively involve them with other students and teachers in learning, in particular in the classrooms, laboratories, and studios of the campus. The key concept is that of educational community and the capacity of institutions to establish educational communities in the first year that actively involve students with other members of the institution.

Unfortunately, the educational experiences of most first year students are not involving. Learning is still very much a spectator sport in which teacher 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 or any apparent relevance to their lives. For too many students courses are simply hurdles to overcome on their pursuit of a university degree and the hoped for economic benefits that are presumed to follow. It is little wonder that students seem so uninvolved in learning. Their learning experiences are not very involving.

What should universities do? How should they reorganize the first year of university and construct settings that promote student learning and retention, especially but not only for students who begin university academically under-prepared? How should they provide the needed information and advice, support, feedback, and involvement that are so critical for student learning and persistence in that year? And how should they engage the many first-year students who work and/or commute for whom the classroom may be the one, perhaps only place where they meet teachers and student peers, the one place where they engage in formal learning?

### **Learning Communities and Collaborative Learning in University Study**

Though there are a number of possible responses to these questions, let me suggest that universities should make learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlies them the hallmark of the first year experience and organize learning less around subjects and disciplines as around relevant issues and problems to which students are asked to apply what they are learning together.

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 content course such as Sociology or History. In other cases, they may link all the courses that make up the first-semester curriculum so that students in the learning community study the same material throughout the semester. Students often take all their classes together either as separate, but linked, classes or as one large class that meets four to six hours at a time several times a week.

The courses in which students co-register are not coincidental or random. They are typically connected by an organizing issue or problem 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 college in California that serves large numbers of Latino students who are either immigrants or children of immigrants has developed a learning community whose theme is captured by the title “Whose Country Is It Anyway?” It combines courses in U.S. History, Sociology, and Basic English/Composition in pursuit of a deeper understanding of the role of immigration in the development of the United States.

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. Academics have reorganized their syllabi and their classrooms to promote shared, collaborative learning experiences among students across the linked classrooms. This form of classroom organization, typically constructed through cooperative or problem-based learning, 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 are asked to share not only the experience of the curriculum, but also of learning within 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, say, developmental English, history, and sociology. 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 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 ask students to become responsible to each other in the process of trying to know. They participate in collaborative groups that require students to be mutually dependent on one another so that the learning of the group does not advance without each member doing his or her part.

The benefits of learning communities for students as documented by research by my colleagues and I at Syracuse University, most notably Catherine Engstrom, are many. Students in learning communities and in collaboratively taught classrooms are more likely to form their own self-supporting groups that extend beyond the classroom and are, in the eyes of students, often critical to their continued enrollment. As one student observed "... the learning community was like a raft running the rapids of my life." Students were also more likely to spend more time together out of class than do students in traditional, standalone classes in ways that students see as supportive of their learning. 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 spend more time-on-task, learn more, and persist more frequently than similar students in stand-alone and/or traditionally taught classrooms. Their involvement with others in learning within the classroom becomes the vehicle through which effort is enhanced, learning is enriched, and commitments to their peers and the institution are engendered. By being placed in a setting where students have to learn together in a collaborative fashion, everyone's understanding and knowledge is enriched. As one student observed, "not only do you learn more, you learn better." Finally, for students who enter higher education academically under-prepared, a disproportionate number who are from low-income backgrounds, learning communities that include one or more basic skills courses, serves to promote their learning and persistence in ways in which stand alone learning centers typically cannot. This is the case because the structure of learning communities enables students to more readily apply the skills they are learning in the basic skills course(s) to the material of the other course(s) that make up the learning community. The result is that students develop a sense of self as learner that further promotes their success or as one student put it "I think I have gotten smarter since I've been here. I can feel it."



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 academics and professional staff is possible and in some cases necessary. In those cases the “teachers” of the learning community is made up of both academics and professional staff. 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.

In this manner, learning communities provide a coherent academic structure that enables the institution to align its various actions for student success. This is important because one of the hallmarks of effective universities is not simply the range of programs in which they invest, but their capacity to carefully align the actions of those programs on behalf of students in a coherent and systematic manner. It is for this reason that a number of universities in the United States have made learning communities the linchpin about which they have organized the first year of university study.

### **Closing Thoughts**

What then of the add-on programs that are typically the hallmark of the first year, what are institutions to make of these piecemeal efforts that are added to the first year experience? Let me suggest that the answer lies not in those programs or in the many dedicated and talented academics and professional staff who are responsible for those programs, but in their integration into the very fabric of the first year experience. Rather than being separate from student experience, they should be linked to other courses, for instance in a first-year learning community, so that the activities that take place in those programs are coherently connected to those that occur in other courses.

It is regrettable that too many universities still use such add-on programs as a “vaccine” to treat the threat of freshman attrition. By leaving them at the margins of institutional life, by treating their ideas as add-ons to the real business of the university, institutions implicitly assume that they can “cure” attrition by “inoculating” students with a dose of educational assistance and do so without changing the rest of the curriculum and the ways students

experience that curriculum. This is not to say that those programs, such as your orientation activities, cannot help promoting student persistence. They can. Rather it is to say that many institutions have inadvertently limited the effectiveness of the ideas that underlie them by isolating the programs from the rest of the curriculum.

One way of understanding this point is to recognize that the appropriate question with which to begin this conversation is not whether universities should have a particular add-on program but with the question “what should be the educational character of the first year of university study?” Only after answering this question should one then ask if a particular program is necessary. If the answer to that question is yes, only then should the question be asked as to the character of that program. Unfortunately, most universities ask only if they should have a particular program and thereby separate out discussions about its character from the much needed conversation about the educational character of the first year of university study, indeed from the character of university education generally. 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 seek to transform that experience and thereby address the deeper roots of student retention. In effect, they take student learning and retention seriously.

Let me close with two simple observations; first that student success does not arise by chance. It is the result of an intentional, structured, and proactive set of strategies that are coherent and systematic in nature and carefully aligned to the same goal; second that at no time is a coherent systematic structure more important than in the first year of university studies, that period that is the focus of this important conference. Thank you.

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