

Taking Student Retention Seriously: Rethinking the First Year of College

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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 course, such as a Freshman Seminar, to help new students persist. The result is that efforts to enhance student retention are increasingly segmented into disconnected parts that are located at the margins of institutional academic life. 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 overall character of college, little to alter student educational experiences, 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? First and foremost it would mean that institutions would stop tinkering at the margins of institutional 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, institutions 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 faculty, not just student affairs professionals, 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 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 educational conditions that best promote learning and retention, in particular during the students' first year of college. 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 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 and not taken. They can be changed if institutions are serious in their pursuit of student retention.

Conditions for Student Success

Five conditions stand out as supportive of student learning and retention, namely expectations, support, feedback, involvement, and relevant learning.

First, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that hold high and clear expectations for student

achievement. The unavoidable fact is that no one rises to low expectations. Unfortunately, it is too often the case that institutions expect too little of their students or construct classroom activities such require too little of their effort. At the same time, students do best in settings where expectations are clear and consistent. This is particular evident in the domain of academic advising. Students need to be clear about what is expected of them and what is required for successful completion of both courses and programs of study. 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.

Second, support is a condition that promotes student retention. Research points to several types of support that promote learning and 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 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 are so effective and why it is important for institutions to align the actions of student support staff with those of the faculty.

Third, feedback is a condition for student success. Students are more likely to succeed in settings that provide faculty, staff, and students frequent feedback about their performance. 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 institutions 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 Tom 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 faculty information on what is or is not being learned in the classroom. When used frequently, such techniques enable students and faculty 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.

Fourth, involvement is a condition for student learning and retention. Educational theorists such as Alexander Astin, Ernest Boyer, George Kuh, and I have long pointed to the importance of academic and social integration or what is more commonly referred to as involvement or engagement to student retention. The more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely are they to persist and graduate. A wide range of studies in a variety of settings and for a range of students have confirmed that the more frequently students engage with faculty, staff, and their peers, the more likely, other things being equally, that they will persist and graduate. Simply put involvement matters, especially during the first year of college when student membership in the communities of the campus is so tenuous.

Involvement is also an important condition for student learning. Even among students who persist, students who are more actively involved in learning, especially with others, learn more and show greater levels of intellectual development. It is for this reason that so much of the literature on institutional retention policy speaks of the importance of building educational communities that actively involve students in learning. At no time does such involvement matter more than in the first year of college when student learning is still so malleable. And nowhere does it matter more than in the classrooms, laboratories, and studios of the campus where students are asked to learn. Let us forget most students in higher education work and/or commute to college. For them the classroom may be the only place where they meet each other and the faculty and engage in formal learning activities. If involvement does not occur there, it is unlikely to occur elsewhere.

Finally, relevant learning is a condition for student learning and retention. The more students find value in their learning, the more they see it as connected to their interests, the likely they will become involved in learning and in turn learn more and persist more frequently. This is true for all students not just the more able and motivated who seek out learning and are more likely to respond to perceived shortcomings in the quality and relevance of learning they experience on campus. It is true as well for the increasing number of students from diverse backgrounds whose family histories are not well represented in the materials they are asked to study.

To sum up, students are more likely to learn and persist 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 faculty in relevant 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 that actively involve students with other members of the institution, in particular with other students in learning in those places where students are asked to learn. On our increasingly diverse campuses, it follows that our educational communities must be inclusive in ways that value and make possible the involvement of all 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 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, in particular those from under-represented groups. 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 college 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 institutions do? How should they reorganize the first year of college and construct settings that promote student learning and retention, especially but not only for students who begin college 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 to college for whom the classroom may be the one, perhaps only place where they meet faculty and student peers, the one place where they engage in formal learning?

Learning Communities and Collaborative Learning in College

Though there are a number of possible responses to these questions, 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 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, as they do in DeAnza College in California or as one large class that meets four to six hours at a time several times a week, as they do in the Coordinated Studies Program at Seattle Central Community College and LaGuardia Community College in New York City.

The courses in which students co-register is not coincidental or random. They are typically connected by an organizing an 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, the Coordinated Studies Program at LaGuardia Community College for ESL students, entitled New House, combines courses in developmental English, developmental reading with a freshman seminar around the theme Identity and Culture. A community college in California that serves large numbers of Latino students who either themselves 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. Faculty have reorganized their syllabi 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 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 for students as documented by our recent national study funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education 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, stand-alone 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 college 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.

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. 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.

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 institution 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. It is for this reason that a number of institutions (e.g. St. Lawrence University, Wagner College) have made learning communities the linchpin about which they have organized the first year of college.

Closing Thoughts

What then of the widely used 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 integration of the freshman seminar and the important concepts that underlie it into the very fabric of the first year. Rather than being separate from student experience, the freshman seminar should be linked to other courses, for instance in a first-year learning community, so that the activities that take place in the seminar are coherently connected to those that occur in other courses.

It is regrettable that too many institutions still use the freshman seminar as a “vaccine” to treat the threat of freshman attrition. By leaving the freshman seminar at the margins of institutional life, by treating its ideas as add-ons to the real business of the college, 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. Unfortunately, by doing so institutions limit the effectiveness of the seminar. This is not to say that the freshman seminar as commonly employed has not been effective in promoting student persistence. It has. Rather it is to say that many institutions have inadvertently limited the effectiveness of the ideas that underlie it by isolating the seminar from the rest of the curriculum.

It can be argued that the long-term goal of the freshman seminar is to make itself unnecessary as a stand-alone, add-on, course. One way of understanding this point is to recognize that the

appropriate question with which to begin this conversation is not whether colleges should have a freshman seminar 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 is necessary. If the answer to that question is yes, only then should the question be asked as to the character of that seminar. Unfortunately, most colleges 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 from the character of collegiate 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.

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