

Rethinking the First Year of College

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Introduction

Interest in student retention has not waned. If anything, it has grown in the past few years. Retention programs have grown to include such initiatives as improved advising, expanded orientation sessions, tutoring and developmental education efforts, peer mentoring, new residence hall arrangements, and the widely popular freshman seminars (Upcraft, Gardner and Associates 1989).

While these retention programs have helped some students complete their college education, their long-term impact on retention has been surprisingly limited, or at least more limited than they need be. The reasons for this are many. Perhaps most important is that most retention programs have done little to change the essential quality of the academic experience for most students, especially during the critical first year of college.

How can colleges and universities enhance their first-year academic experiences? How can they enhance the impact of their programs upon student retention?

To begin to answer these questions let's first review what we have learned about the scope and causes of student leaving.

We know that more than 47 percent of all students in America who start at a four-year college still fail to earn a degree at that college; and nearly 56 percent of all dropouts from four-year institutions leave before the start of their second year. We also know that student departures during college take a variety of forms and arise from a diversity of sources, individual and institutional. There is no one form of behavior, no single prevailing reason for leaving. There are many types of leaving. Of these, researchers have been able to identify seven major causes of student withdrawal.

Academic difficulty. Some students leave because they are unable or unwilling to meet the minimum academic standards of the institution. They are asked to leave, or soon expect to be. Most of these leavings arise because of insufficient academic skills or poor study habits.

But while the incidence of academic dismissals seems to be increasing, and on some campuses now makes up a majority of all student leavers, it remains the case that departures for academic reasons still represent only 30 to 35 percent of all leaving nationally.

The majority of departures continue to arise voluntarily, and they usually do so despite sufficient levels of grade performance. These types of departures typically arise from the following causes:

Adjustment difficulties. Even the most academically gifted and socially mature students experience some difficulties making the transition from secondary school to the demands of college. For most, these difficulties are transitory. But for some the adjustment to the more rigorous academic work and different, more competitive social life of college is quite difficult, and can lead to early withdrawal from college, often in the first six weeks of the first semester.

Some individuals feel awkward among strangers, or find it hard to deal with other new students. Others are unprepared for the greater diversity of associates, or come from backgrounds that differ markedly from most of their classmates. For them, college is a sometimes 'foreign' experience, the transition to it, difficult.

Goals: Entering students vary in their clarity and intensity of purpose. Many students begin college with only a vague notion of why they have done so. But while some uncertainty of career goals is typical of most undergraduates, difficulties arise when goals go unresolved for too long because such uncertainty can undermine the willingness of students to perform the work needed to remain in college.

Other new students enter college with narrow or limited goals such as preparing for a career in theater or in professional sports, or using one college as a stepping stone for transfer to another university, so they may leave before earning a degree. And, of course,

some students will alter their goals after a year or two on campus. They decide they don't want to be scientists, physicians, or school teachers after all, so they drop out even when their grades are satisfactory. Or they discover a deep interest in jazz piano, designing new computer software, or making films, and they leave.

Commitments: Earning a baccalaureate degree over four years requires a high level of commitment. Not all students possess that degree of commitment. They are unwilling to spend the effort to complete their college degree requirements. They have the ability to do college work, but not the commitment.

Others, however, though wanting to stay, are pulled away from college because of external commitments. They leave to handle a divorce, death, or drinking problem at home, to explore a relationship with a loved one in another state, or to help with the family farm or business. A majority of these departing students are likely to be stop-outs rather than dropouts. Given the opportunity and change of external circumstances, they frequently will return to college at a later date.

Finances. Some students leave because they cannot afford to stay. More than a few students, especially those from low-income, working class or disadvantaged backgrounds, leave because they are unable to bear the direct and indirect costs of college attendance or are unable to continue attending when financial needs change. Even with a part-time job, loans, and some college aid, some students simply cannot afford to continue or find the burden of doing so too great to bear. Though some will continue to work on their degree part-time or return at a later date when they have earned money to pay for their college costs, others will leave never to return.

But here an important caveat is warranted. Institutional research, especially those that employ exit interviews or surveys, often overstates the importance of finances to student decisions to leave. This is the case because more than a few students in using the term finances refer less to cost per se than to the perceived value of what they are receiving for the cost they bear in attending. “Inadequate finances” often turns out to be a smoke screen for more complicated reasons for leaving some of which are the direct result of their academic and social experiences on campus. It is telling that many of these students do not describe their actions as leaving as much as not returning.

Fit. Some students leave because they feel they do not “fit” or do not “belong” socially or academically. They feel the college is “not right” for them. In the jargon of researchers, there is a lack of congruence between the individual and the institution.

Frequently, the student has chosen unwisely. But as frequently it is the institution that fails with its unfriendly atmosphere, lack of concern for student needs and growth, or a poorly designed academic program. Some students, for instance, leave a college because they are bored or unchallenged intellectually. In this case the students leave not because they have failed but because they want to take a positive step toward receiving a better education elsewhere. Transfer rather than permanent withdrawal is typically the result.

Involvement Some students leave because they feel lonely, isolated, unable to establish connections with their classmates or other students on campus, or with the

college’s professors and administrators. Leavers of this type express a sense of not having made any significant contacts and not feeling membership in the institution. They feel marginal, unconnected, isolated. Indeed research has repeatedly shown that involvement or the lack thereof is, after controlling for individual attributes, the single most important predictor of student persistence. And it is particularly important during the critical first year of college when student attachments are so tentative.

Learning. Finally, learning is a predictor of student persistence. Simply put, students who learn and find value in their learning are students who stay. Least we forget the point of retention is not that students stay, but that they learn and graduate having acquired the knowledge and skills needed for participation in society.

As noted earlier, the inability to learn or difficulty in learning is a factor in leaving. Some students leave because they are unable to meet the challenge of learning in college. But just as important, but less frequently discussed, is the fact that other students leave when they find the academic life of the college insufficiently challenging or rewarding. Not surprisingly, these students are often the most able and motivated members of a class. Nor is it surprising that they typically transfer to other institutions whose perceived quality is higher. It is for this reason that a number of observers, including this writer, have argued that the best retention program is always a strong academic program that actively involves students in learning, especially with others (Tinto, 2001).

The shortcoming of retention programs

In responding to these types of student departures, many colleges and universities have put in place a variety of retention programs.

To address the need for academic assistance, for instance, institutions have introduced a range of remedial (or developmental) courses, tutorials, and supplemental instruction activities to enhance the skills of these students. As a way of easing the transition to college, institutions have increasingly turned to extended orientation sessions and required freshman courses, such as “University 101,” which stress coping skills as well as the provision of information about the many ways of negotiating the demands of college life. Some colleges have also emphasized better advising and career counseling as ways of helping students make more informed academic and career choices. Other institutions have stressed social activities and faculty and student mentor programs as mechanisms for the development of much need affiliation among new students and between students and faculty.

But while it is the case that several institutions report sizable increases in student persistence as a result of their new retention efforts, most report only modest gains. In analyzing why this is so, I have increasingly come to think that the main reason is that most retention programs are largely non-academic in nature.

Most retention programs are managed by, indeed staffed by, student affairs personnel. Though faculty involvement has usually been sought, most professors have been reluctant to participate in these new

efforts. As one scholar said to me, “If it weren’t for the admissions office admitting students who don’t belong here, we wouldn’t have a retention problem. And if we have a retention problem, it’s the responsibility of the student affairs people to deal with it.”

Of course, some faculty members do get involved in first year programs. But many do not. And some retention programs emphasize academic issues, but many do not. And when they do, they are largely peripheral or supplemental to the academic experience, not an integral part of it. As a result, existing retention programs have done little to change the daily academic experiences of students in the classrooms and laboratories of the university where learning takes place.

This should change. Faculty should become more actively involved in retention efforts; and retention programs should include initiatives that change the everyday academic experience of students, especially during the critical first year. This is especially urgent for commuters students since classrooms and laboratories are often the only places where commuters actively engage with faculty and other students.

After more than a decade of research in this field, I am persuaded that the roots of successful student retention lie in better education during the first year. Sure, finer orientations to college, closer freshman advising, more financial aid, stronger development courses, more freshman mixers, and improved residence hall arrangements are all a help to new students. But unless students become keenly involved in higher learning from the first month, a considerable number of them will be reluctant to stay.

Rather than merely tinkering at the margins of academic life, academic planners need to direct their attention to a major reconstruction of the learning settings that mark campus life, especially during the foundational first year of college. The question they must ask is not what programs are needed to retain students, but how the learning settings of that year should be constructed so as to promote student education in that year and beyond.

Fortunately, a small but growing number of colleges and universities have begun to turn their attention to the task of educational reform in the first year. They have sought to alter the settings, classrooms, and laboratory experiences in which education occurs. Among these reforms, one of the most promising, in my view, is the creation of "learning communities" for new college students.

Learning communities in the first year

In their most basic form learning communities are a kind of co-registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together. The same students register for two or more courses, forming a sort of study team. In a few cases this may mean sharing the entire first-semester curriculum together (Gabelnick et al. 1990) so that all new students in that learning community are studying the same material. Sometimes it will link all freshmen by tying two courses together for all, most typically a course in writing with a course in selected literature, or biographies, or current social problems. In the larger universities such as the University of Oregon and the University of Washington, students in a learning community may attend lectures with 200-300 other students but stay

together for a smaller discussion section (Freshman Interest Group) led by a graduate student or upperclassman. In Seattle Central Community College however, students in the Coordinated Studies Program take all their courses together in one block of time so that the community meets two or three times a week for four to six hours at a time.

Typically, learning communities are organized around a central theme which links the courses -- say, "Body and Mind" in which required courses in human biology, psychology, and sociology are linked in pursuit of a singular piece of knowledge: how and why humans behave as they do. At New York's LaGuardia Community College, learning communities are designed for students studying for a career in business (the Enterprise Center) as well as for students requiring developmental academic assistance (the New Student House). In these cases, the character of the learning experience is very much a reflection of the quality of faculty collaboration and the degree to which the experience of the linked courses form of educationally coherent whole.

Clearly there is no one type of learning community, there are many. Experimentation is rife as colleges seek to create the best kind of learning communities at that campus.

Nearly all the experiments have two things in common though. One is *shared learning*. 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. The other is *connected learning*. By organizing the shared courses around a theme or single large subject, learning

communities seek to construct a coherent first year educational experience that is not just an unconnected array of courses in, say, composition, calculus, modern history, Spanish, and geology.

A feature of learning communities that has made them easy to install is that some types of communities require relatively little from the faculty. It is possible for faculty to continue to teach much as they always have. What may be different for professors is the content of the freshmen courses and some of the assignments. Students may be given group or team projects instead of being asked to do individual study. But the restructuring is largely in the way students are registered together and the way the first-year courses are packaged around a common topic, theme, or study projects. The change in faculty behavior required is minimal, except for possible ventures in team teaching.

This is not to say that some learning communities have not involved faculty in some important ways and have not required faculty to make significant changes in their behavior. Some have. Those at Seattle Central Community College, for instance, require a good deal of faculty collaboration in the construction of course content and a healthy dose of collaborative teaching; a form of teaching that is not often found in the repertoire of teaching skills faculty bring to the classroom. My point is that altered faculty behavior, though desirable, is not required to reap some of the benefits of first year learning communities.

By registering students for the same courses or having all new students study the same topic, the entering students form their own self-supporting associations to give each other academic and social support. They

spend more time together out of class than do students in traditional, unrelated stand-alone classes. The common study of a subject and co-registration brings them together fast as small communities of learners.

Not surprisingly the students in these new learning communities tend to report themselves more satisfied with their first year experiences in college. And they are more likely to persist beyond the first year. For example, at Seattle Central Community College, learning community students have continued at a rate approximately 25 percentage points higher than those students in the traditional curriculum. Indeed, even in institutions where retention rates are high, such as the University of Washington, students in that institution's Freshmen Interest Groups persist more frequently than those taking stand-alone courses. And it is all because of the simple strategic change of allowing students to share much of a more connected first-year curriculum together.

As one student told us in our recent study (Tinto, Goodsell, and Russo 1994):

“In the cluster we knew each other; we were friends... We discussed everything from all our classes... If we needed help, or if we had questions, we could help each other.”

Actually, many of the new learning communities, as noted above, do more than co-register students around a topic. They often change the manner in which students are educated. Some faculty members employ collaborative pedagogies, asking students to take an active role in the construction of knowledge rather than merely listening to lectures. Other teachers require the students to work interdependently by assigning work

that cannot be completed without the responsible participation of each group member. In a few cases, faculty members assign carefully constructed group projects, inducing students to integrate the intellectual matter of several of their classes. Occasionally the results have been startling.

The fruit of innovation

These freshly designed learning communities for new undergraduates appear to be yielding important benefits. First, students become more actively involved in classroom learning. And as students spend more time learning, they learn more (Astin 1984). Second, the new students spend more time learning together. This enhances the quality of their learning; and by learning together everyone's understanding and knowledge is enriched. Third, these students form social groups outside their classrooms, bonding in ways that increase their persistence in college. Fourth, students often develop a deeper appreciation of the value of cooperation and of including many voices in the construction of knowledge. Fifth, learning communities enable students to bridge the large divide between academic classes and student social conduct that frequently characterizes student life (Moffatt 1989), especially in the first two years on campus. They tend to learn and make close friends at the same time.

Learning communities also encourage the student services staff to work more closely with the faculty by jointly constructing a first-semester curriculum specifically tailored for new students. At New York City's LaGuardia Community College the First Year Seminars are in fact staffed by both faculty and student affairs people. At Leeward

Community College in Hawaii, advisors, counselors, and peer-student mentors meet weekly with new students to discuss both their classwork and the requirements for making it through college. With such approaches the two separate fiefdoms of faculty and student services staff can be brought closer together.

One last outcome, one that is especially important in our time of what Robert Bellah calls rampant "expressive individualism," and of growing racial, gender, sexual, and ideological divisions on campus, is that of greater collaboration among students. Cleverly arranged learning communities stimulate a great deal of cooperative learning. They provide lessons that no lectures or homilies can provide. They teach students that their learning and that of their peers are inexorably intertwined, and that, regardless of race, class, gender, or background, their academic interests are at bottom the same. Thus, the introduction of learning communities for first-year students can not only increase retention but also develop educational citizenship, a quality that is in danger of eroding throughout the nation.

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