Student Success and the Building of Involving Educational Communities

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Interest in the issue of student success, in particular student retention, has not waned. If anything it has grown over the years. So much so that we have witnessed the growth of a new industry of retention firms, consultants, and retention-related products that offer the promise of a quick-fix to the "retention problem." Though there is no doubt some value to the work of these firms, the root of institutional success does not lie in their employment. Nor does it lie, as so many faculty believe, in retention programs per se or even in the dedicated staff that support those programs. Though their work is invaluable to those programs, their effort alone does not account for institutional success. Instead it resides in the work of the faculty and in the institution's capacity to construct educational communities that actively engage students in learning. It lies not in the retention of students but in their education.

Successful education, not retention, is the secret of successful retention programs. It is for this reason that I will argue that the success of institutional retention efforts ultimately resides in the institution's capacity to engage faculty and administrators across the campus in a collaborative effort to construct educational settings, classrooms and otherwise, that actively engage students, all students not just some, in learning. To make clear why this is the case, we must first review what we have learned about the sources of student attrition and speak, in turn, to the importance of institutional assessment in the construction of effective retention programs.

Forms of Student Departure

As to the character of student attrition, there is no one form of behavior, no prevailing type of leaving which best characterizes the phenomena researchers mistakenly label as student dropout. Student departure takes a variety of forms and arises from a diversity of sources, individual and institutional. The variation in causes of departure is, in a very real sense, as varied as the institutional settings from which it arises. Nevertheless, in the midst of this complexity it is possible to identify a number of major causes of student withdrawal from institutions of higher education.

Academic Difficulty

One of these, that which is most talked about today, can be described by the term academic difficulty. Simply put, some students leave because they are unable or unwilling to meet the minimum academic standards of the institution. They frequently leave because they are forced to leave or soon expect to be. Understandably most of these leavings arise because of insufficient academic skills and the development of poor study habits.

Though the incidence of academic dismissal is increasing, and on some campuses now makes up a large proportion of all student leavers, it still represents only twenty to thirty percent of all dropouts nationally. Despite recent reports of the deterioration of academic skills among college students, it remains the case that the majority of departures arise *voluntarily* in that they occur despite the maintenance of sufficient levels of grade performance. They result not from poor academic skills per se, but from a host of other events which mirror the character of individual goals and commitments, the availability of financial resources, and, most importantly, the nature of individual social and academic experiences in college after entry. Among this category of voluntary leaving, there appears to be seven distinct causes of departure. These can be described by the terms adjustment, goals, uncertainty, commitments, congruence, isolation, and finances.

Adjustment

Some departure, primarily those which arise very early in the student career, result from the person's inability to make the adjustment to the academic and social life of the college. Even the most able or socially mature can experience problems in making the transition from high school or work to the demands of college. For most these difficulties are transitory. For others the transition may be quite difficult, severe enough to lead to early withdrawal from college, often in the first six weeks of the first semester.

Some individuals enter college insufficiently prepared for the scale of the academic and social change required of them. Others come from backgrounds and/or situations which differ markedly from those of most people on campus (e.g. disadvantaged students). The scope of the adjustments they are required to make often overwhelms them. Yet others do not possess the coping skills which enable them to deal with new situations easily. As distinguished from persons who successfully make the transition to college, they appear unable to make positive steps toward problem resolution. Without assistance, they leave not because they are unable to meet the demands of college, but because they have been unable to cope with the problems of making the transition to college. They leave without giving themselves a chance to succeed.

Goals

But not all early departures are the result of the inability of persons to adjust to college. Some reflect the character of individual goals and the extent of individual commitments to the goal of college completion. Not all persons enter college with clearly held goals or with goals which are either coterminous with degree completion or compatible with the educational goals of the institution into which first entry is made.

Some individuals enter colleges with goals which are either more limited than or more extensive than those of the institution. Among the former, it is evident that many persons enter colleges for quite limited purposes and intend to leave prior to degree completion. Rather than representing some failure of purpose, their departure reflects their having successfully completed their plans for study. Among the latter, it is often the case that persons enter colleges with the often unstated intention of leaving prior to degree completion in order to transfer to another institution. In both two and four-year colleges, but particularly in the former, entry to one institution is seen as necessary temporary step toward eventual goal completion.

Whatever the character of initial intentions, some students will alter their goals during the course of their college careers. For some this change will reflect the natural process of maturation that occurs among maturing youth. For others it will also mirror the impact the college experience has on individual judgments and preferences. In either instance, change in individual goals may lead students to leave even when their college experience has been quite satisfactory.

Uncertainty

All this assumes, of course, that students enter colleges with clearly defined goals. In fact this is not the case. Many, possibly even a majority of students begin their college careers with only the vaguest notions of why they have done so. That they have yet to clearly formulate their educational and career goals is in itself not a problem. Some degree of uncertainty is typical of most student careers. Difficulties arise, however, when individual goals go unresolved over long periods of time. This is the case because lack of goal clarity serves to undermine the willingness of students to meet the demands of college life and enhances the likelihood that individuals will, when stressed, leave rather than persist.

Commitments

Goal considerations aside, the completion of a college degree requires a considerable amount of effort and therefore commitment to the goal of college completion. Not all students possess that commitment. Their leaving, whether forced or voluntary, mirrors more their unwillingness to expend the effort required to attain the goal of college completion than it does lack of ability to do so.

At the same time, however, individual commitments to college may be influenced by external commitments which limit the person's ability to meet the demands of college. Rather than leave because of lack of commitment, such persons are often "pulled away" from college-going. Though they may be seen by institutions as no different from other leavers, such persons are frequently more likely to return to college once those external commitments are met.

As in the case of goals, individual commitments will also change during the course of the student career. And like goals, those changes will necessarily mirror the character of individual experiences in college after entry. In this regard, *one of the clearest outcomes of research on student departure is the finding that individual experiences within college after entry are more important to*

persistence and departure than what has gone on before entry. Though personality attributes and prior experience matter, they have less to do with departure, given entry, than do the quality of individual academic and social experiences within the college with other members of the institution, faculty, staff, and student.

Finances

Finances also influence decisions to leave college. Many students, especially those from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds, leave because they are unable to bear the full cost, direct and indirect, of going to college. In addition, when attending, they are often forced to attend part-time and/or work while in college because the aid is either insufficient or structured to require large debt burden (i.e. loans verses grants). Though they receive financial assistance, the character of that aid may require them to take on additional responsibilities which themselves detract from the likelihood of continued persistence.

But here an important caveat is called for, namely that we have sometimes overestimated the importance of finances to college continuation. That this is the case, is largely the result of the way in which researchers have used exit interview and student survey data to establish the importance of financial aid to retention. Though leaving students typically rank financial aid, together with the ubiquitous category of "personal reasons", as the most important reason for leaving, follow-up interviews typically reveal that students often use the category of finances to describe their evaluation of the benefits of their experience relative to the cost of that experience. That is to say that student decisions to leave reflect not so much cost per se as it does the value of what they receive for that cost. Not surprisingly their notions of value are intimately tied to the quality of their academic and social experiences in the college.

Integration and Community Membership

The concepts of integration and community membership appear to best describe how those experiences impact upon student persistence. Experiences, academic and social, which serve to integrate the individual into the life of college, also serve to heighten attachments and therefore strengthen individual commitments both to the goal of education and to the institution. Conversely the lack of integration and the absence of membership serves to undermine commitments and thereby heighten the likelihood of departure.

In the academic and social life of college, lack of integration takes on three distinct forms that may apply either to the academic or the social realm of college life. It may be seen in the inability of the individual to make the adjustment to the new academic and social demands of college life. It may also arise from the incongruence or mismatch of the individual with the social and/or intellectual life of the institution. Lack of integration may also be reflective of the isolation of the individual from the life of the institution. Rather than being the outcome of a mismatch of needs and interests, incongruence, may also mirror the absence of significant contact between the individual and other members of the institution. Though congruency may be possible, the individual is unable to become integrated because he or she is unable to establish personal bonds with other members of the institution.

Incongruence

Incongruence is largely the outcome of the quality of interaction between the individual and other members of the institution. It reflects the person's evaluation of the manner and degree to which the social and intellectual life of the institution serves his or her interests and needs. Departure in this case frequently leads the individual to transfer to another institution deemed more suited to his or her needs and interests. Here the terms mismatch and/or irrelevancy are often used to describe the ways in which students perceive their incongruence.

Another form of incongruence, one that should be of concern to all institutions, is that which arises when individuals find the intellectual demands of the institution insufficiently stimulating. They leave not only because they are out of place but also because they are bored. It is perhaps telling of the state of higher education that such individuals are frequently more able and more concerned about the quality of education than is the average persister on campus. Not surprisingly, such leavers most frequently understand their actions, not as a form of failure but as a positive step towards goal fulfillment. They see the institution as failing them rather than the reverse.

Isolation

Unlike incongruence, isolation is largely the outcome of the lack of interaction between the person and other members of the institution. Departure arises not from of a mismatch but from the absence of significant social and/or intellectual contact. Most typically, leavers of this type express a sense of not having made significant contact or having established membership in the life of the institution. Rather than feeling at odds with the communities of the college, they express a sense of separation from or marginality to the life of those communities. Though both forms of isolation, social and intellectual, influence decisions to leave, isolation from the academic life of the college, in particular from the faculty who shape that life, proves to be an especially important source of attrition. This is the case because of the absence of faculty contact undermines student involvement in the learning process and thereby diminishes student growth.

The Need For Institutional Assessment

The complexity of student departure, which we have only touched upon here, is further compounded by the understandable fact that the specific forms and roots of student leaving necessarily reflect the specific institutional context in which it occurs. Though departure from different institutions may share a number of important functional similarities, the specific individual and institutional roots of departure will necessarily differ. While institutions can and should learn from one another's experience, it remains the case that each institution must assess for itself the particular attributes of student departure from its campus. Only in that manner can institutions identify and accurately target specific forms of actions to the task of student retention. Institutional assessment is, in this fashion, a necessary beginning step in the formulation of an effective retention program.

Three observations should be made about the need for institutional assessment of

student departure. First, despite claims to the contrary, effective institutional assessment is within the reach of virtually all institutions of higher education. Though it does require some skill and not an inconsiderable amount of effort to carry out such assessments, the mechanisms for student assessment are readily available to most institutions of higher education. Second, assessments of student retention can be gainfully employed in the development of institutional early-warning systems. Such systems serve to identify "high-risk" students who are more likely to experience difficulty in completing their degree programs than are most other students. When linked to other institutional services, the identification of "high-risk" enables institutions to target services to those persons before "high-risk" turns into high rates of departure. In this fashion, institutional assessment of student retention can and does serve as an integral part of an effective retention program. Third, ongoing student assessment systems can also be utilized for the purposes of program evaluation, the information they provide part of a broader effort to assess the operation of the institution and the differential impact of different programs upon student outcomes.

The Essential Features of Effective Retention Programs

The question remains as to what institutions can do to retain more of their students until degree completion. Here the growing body of research on student retention and program effectiveness yields important insights as to the essential features of successful retention programs. Though programs on different campuses vary somewhat in their structure and in the specific sorts of actions they take on behalf of students, successful programs are invariably similar in a number of important ways, specifically in the way they think about retention, in the sorts of emphasis they give their retention efforts, and in the ends to which they direct their energies. These commonalities, or what I call here the principles of effective retention, can be described an enduring commitment to student welfare, a broader commitment to the education, not mere retention, of all students, and an emphasis upon the importance of social and intellectual community in the education of students.

Institutional Commitment to Students

One of the most evident features of effective retention programs is their enduring commitment to the students they serve. Rather than reflect only institutional interests, they continually ask of themselves how their actions serve to further the welfare of students. Like healthy and caring communities generally, effective retention programs direct their energies to helping students further their own needs and interests.

There is no programmatic substitute for this sort of commitment, no easy way to measure its occurrence. It is not the sole province of specific programs or of designated program staff but is the responsibility of all members of the institutions, faculty and staff alike. As such it is reflected in the daily activities of all program members and in the choices they make as to the goals to which they direct their energies. The presence of a strong commitment to students results in an identifiable ethos of caring which permeates the character of institutional life. Student-centered institutions are, in their everyday life, tangibly different from those institutions which place student welfare second to other goals.

It is in this very important sense that institutions of higher education are like other human communities. The essential character of such communities lies not in their formal structures, but in the underlying values which inspire their construction. The ability of an institution to retain students lies less in the formal programs they devise than in the underlying commitment toward students which direct their activities.

But it is a commitment that takes nurturing, one that is built upon incentives, rewards, and the investment of resources in the education of students. At the same time, it is a commitment on the part of all members of the institution, faculty, staff, and administrative, not just those few appointed staff whose job it is to focus on retention. Though the work of such dedicated staff is important, it alone is not sufficient to ensure the success of institutional retention efforts. In the long run, institutional success requires the collaborative effort of all members of the institution, faculty, staff, and administrators alike.

Educational Commitment

The secret of effective institutions also reflects the fact that their commitment to students goes beyond the concern for retention per se to that of the education of students. The social and intellectual growth of students, not their mere retention, is the mark of effective retention efforts. Here I suggest lies the key to successful retention programs, namely that they focus not on the goal of retention but on the broader goal of student education.

Put in more direct language, effective retention programs do not take learning to chance. They see it as an integral part of their mission that they are proactive in their search for student learning and success. They require of themselves, their faculty, staff, and students that each engage in activities to heighten the likelihood that learning arises within the college. For that reason, successful institutions assess student skills, mandate placement in appropriate course settings, provide student development assistance, monitor student performance, and provide early, direct, and frequent feedback to students and staff. Equally important, they concern themselves with the nature of the learning settings in which students find themselves and the skills faculty possess to educate the students they encounter in those settings.

Social and Intellectual Community

A third common feature of effective retention programs, indeed of institutions with high rates of student retention generally, is their emphasis upon the communal nature of institutional life and the importance of educational community, social and academic, in the learning process. They have come to understand that student learning best occurs in settings that integrate students into their daily life and provide social and intellectual support for their individual efforts.

Effective programs reach out to make contact with students in order to establish personal bonds among students and between students, faculty, and staff members of the institution. In this manner effective retention

programs not only provide continuing assistance to students, they also act to ensure the integration of all individuals as equal and competent members of the academic and social communities of the college.

It is for this reason that effective programs have focused much of their energies on constructing classroom settings and academic programs across classrooms that actively involve and support students in the learning process. They see successful student participation in the community of the classroom as a vehicle both to individual learning and to membership in supportive college communities generally.

For all students, but certainly for those who are first-generation college students or who need developmental assistance, effective programs also understand that support for learning must come from many quarters, not only from the faculty who are the guardians of the classroom. It is for this reason that effective programs stress the importance of frequent and rewarding contact between faculty, staff, and students in a variety of settings both inside and outside the formal confines of the classrooms and laboratories of institutional life. The use of faculty and peer mentor programs, frequent informal meetings and activities all serve to heighten the degree and range of interaction among members of the community. The stress here is on the nature of student, faculty, and staff contact and its relationship to the student development. The research in this regard is quite clear, namely that the frequency and perceived worth of interaction with faculty, staff, and other students is one of the strongest predictors not only of student persistence but also of student development.

The importance of a supportive community for student success is particularly apparent among students of color, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For those students in largely white institutions, academic and social support is absolutely essential for their continued persistence and development as students. By contrast, the messages they frequently receive in and out of classrooms as to their marginality does much to explain their leaving. The point of my making this observation is merely another way of reminding us that the educational communities we construct must be inclusive communities in which all students, not just some, are able to gain a valued voice in the construction of knowledge.

The Question of Choice: Where Does One Invest Scarce Resources On Behalf of Student Retention?

The practical question remains as to where and in what form should institutions invest scarce resources to enhance student retention? Here the evidence of effective programs is clear, namely that the practical route to successful retention lies in those programs that ensure, from the very outset of student contact with the institution, that entering students are integrated into the social and academic communities of the college and acquire the skills and knowledge needed to become successful learners in those communities.

Principles of Implementation

Several important principles of implementation should be noted. First, institutions must recognize that frontloading

of effort is the wisest course of action. The earlier one addresses the problem of student departure, the greater the likely returns to retention efforts. This is the case not only because the greatest proportion of leaving occurs in the first year, but also because over half of all student leavings have their roots in the first-year college experience. Efforts to reshape the freshman year experience invariably have the largest return in both retention and student learning.

Second, institutions must also understand that there is no one retention program in which they should invest, no one type of program which provides the "cure" for student retention. Rather than reflect any one type of effort, successful institution retention programs are the result of the coordination across the campus of a variety of different types of programs, academic and social, that seek, in differing ways, to integrate and support students and promote their becoming effective learners while in college.

Third, student learning should not be left to chance. Institutions must invest in forms of intrusive monitoring and assessment of student academic progress that enable them to intervene early, rather than later, in the student career. They must be able to ascertain from the outset of the first semester whether additional assistance is required. And they must be able to ascertain, within the classroom, when students are in further need of assistance. Most typically, this means that assessment must be carried out within classrooms by the faculty who teach first-year students and be structured so as to provide feedback to students on a continuing basis early in the first year.

Last, but by no means least, institutions should invest their energies to enhance the education of their students. Institutions should give serious attention to the character of student experiences both inside and outside the classroom and to the curricular and staff development resources needed to ensure that those experiences promote, rather than constrain, student learning. Quality teaching and engaging classroom and co-curricular activity should be the norm, not the exception, of student experience.

Programs and Procedures

Institutions have employed a wide array of programs to help students succeed. These range from pre-admission and orientation programs, early learning assessment and mandated academic assistance, mandatory first-year advising and counseling, intrusive monitoring and assessment of first-year student academic progress, freshman courses that provide new students with the knowledge and skills needed for satisfactory college performance, faculty and peer mentor programs, staff development programs that enable faculty to acquire the skills they need to become more effective teachers, to the development of learning communities that enable new students to share their learning experiences.

As regards early assessment, institutions should carefully assess the skills of their entering students and mandate, where necessary, placement in developmental education courses. Simply put, each entering student should be provided with the opportunity to acquire the academic skills needed to prosper and learn while in college.

Where possible, that assistance should be integrated with, rather than segregated from, ongoing freshman year courses. That is to say, it should be so organized as to enable students to make some progress toward degree completion during their first year of college. Colleges should avoid the situation where assistance is so structured as to preclude any form of credit coursework during the first year. It is for that reason that many programs have employed summer bridge programs to ensure that no entering student begins the regular academic year so far behind other students that some degree of integration in the regular academic program is impossible. The same logic applies to the use of supplemental instruction that attaches learning assistance to ongoing programs and classes.

Colleges should consider establishing freshmen year academic programs that are tailored to the specific educational needs of new students. In some cases, this may mean the use of summer bridge programs to enable students to acquire needed skills. In other cases, it may mean the restructuring of part or all of the freshmen year and the establishment of a freshmen year faculty and staff whose particular job it is to serve the educational needs of first-year students. However conceived, the essential point of first year programs is not simply that they focus on new students, but that they provide institutions with a way of effectively responding to student needs during the first year of college.

In this regard, institutions should give serious consideration to changing the character of the educational experience that most beginning student encounter in their first year of college. Rather than repeat educational experiences that emphasize passivity and solo performance, institutions should construct educational settings that encourage, indeed require, active involvement in the learning process with others. Specifically, I refer to the growing movement toward collaborative and cooperative learning in higher education and the development of learning communities for first-year students. If you have not yet done so, I urge you know to move quickly to join that movement and give your students a meaningful voice in their own education. As we have discovered in our studies of collaborative learning for the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, gaining that voice and sharing it with others is a very powerful educative experience that enhances both learning and student persistence. And it does so for all students, not just those typically labeled as "honor students."

Least we forget, for most colleges and most students, the classroom is the primary place of contact between faculty and students. Given students time and commitments, if students do not engage there, they do not become engaged elsewhere. If they are uninvolved in the classroom, they will very likely remain uninvolved in other aspects of their educational experience. It is for this reason that effective programs have focused much of their energies on constructing classroom settings and academic programs that actively involve students in the learning process and ensure, as best they can, that both faculty and students enter those classrooms with the skills needed to make that process effective.

This means, of course, that special attention must be paid to the teaching skills of faculty and their ability to assess, within the classroom, their students learning. All faculty, but new faculty in particular, should be expected to participate in staff development

programs that enable participants to acquire a range of pedagogical skills that can be brought to bear on the demanding task of teaching students from diverse backgrounds and cultures. And they should be expected to assess for themselves their students' learning. In the final analysis, it is classroom level assessment that is most effective in altering the character of the teacher-student relationship and the learning that arises from it.

Concluding Observation

In closing, let me point out that the view I have presented here is by no means a radical or a new one. Rather it is one which refers us back to some very important traditions of higher education, namely that it is at its core concerned with the fostering of communities of persons whose work it is to ensure the social and intellectual development of its members, in particular its student members. Seen in this fashion, the secret of successful retention programs is no secret at all, but a reaffirmation of some of the important foundations of higher education. There is no great secret to successful retention programs, no mystery which requires unravelling. Though successful retention programming does require some skill and not an inconsiderable amount of effort, it does not require sophisticated machinery. It is within the reach of all institutions if they only give serious attention to the character of their educational mission and the obligation it entails. It is here that I conclude my comments, with the notion that successful retention is no more than, but certainly no less than, successful education.

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