Establishing Conditions for Student Success:
Lessons Learned in the United States[*]

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In the United States the issue of access to higher education is typically less important than that of retention and graduation. This is the case because most students in the United States can gain access to some form of higher education, two or four-year. Though not all students do so, it can be said that there is a place somewhere in our higher educational system for virtually anyone who wishes to go. The same cannot be said of graduation from higher education.

As a factual matter, only slightly more than half of all students (51 percent) who begin university study in the United States complete their degree within six years within in their initial institution of registration (NCES, 2002)[1]. But this is only an average. Graduation rates for our universities and colleges vary considerably. Some elite private universities such as Harvard and Princeton graduate over 90% of their students and several very selective public universities such as the University of California at Los Angeles, the University of Virginia, and the University of Michigan, graduate over 80% of their students. On the other hand, many open-enrollment universities, especially those in the large cities, graduate less than 30% of their students. Similar variation exists among our states. Some states, such as Connecticut and Rhode Island, report that over sixty-five percent of their students earn their four-year degrees within five years, while other states, such as Idaho and Utah, report that slightly less than 30 percent of their students do so. Clearly there is still much to do to improve graduation rates in the United States.

Just as clearly there is still much to do to close the gaps in graduation rates between different groups in our society. Despite years of effort and not an inconsiderable degree of progress, African-American, Hispanic American, and Native American students still graduate less frequently than do majority students. Recent data from a six-year longitudinal study of beginning college students in the United States document differences as large as twenty two percent in six-year graduation rates (NCES, 2002).

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[1] An additional 8 -12 percent will eventually earn their university degrees via transfer to another four-year college or university. As a result, it is now estimated that approximately 60 to 63 percent of all students who begin in a university or four-year college will earn their college degrees within seven or eight years

It is not surprising therefore that there is so much interest not only in research on student retention generally and that of ethnic minority students in particular, but also in research that documents the effectiveness of institutional, federal, and state efforts to increase student retention. We all want to know what works.

What Works: An Institutional Perspective

In the US, there is a considerable body of research on the causes of student "dropout." It is one of the most widely studied issues in higher education in the United States over the past twenty-five years. But knowing why students dropout does not tells us what institutions can do to promote student retention, at least not directly. This is the case because retention is not the mirror image of dropout; the factors that help explain why students leave are not the same as those that explain an institution's ability to help students stay and graduate. For that reason, it is important to know what colleges and universities in the United States are now doing to enhance student retention, especially among excluded groups.

Here we focus on the conditions in which students are placed, not their attributes or their lives outside the university. We do so because even though it is true that one way to increase retention at any institution is to recruit more able and motivated students and/or those for whom attending the university is the only thing that fills up their day, those choices are not readily available to most universities in the United States. Most of our universities are open enrollment. They admit virtually anyone who has completed secondary school. For those institutions the only viable approach to increasing student retention, at least in the short-term, is to establish conditions within the university that promote student retention. Unlike the many forces that shape student dropout that are beyond our control, such as student personal lives, the conditions in which students are placed are under university control and can be changed if universities so wish.

What are these conditions? What does research on student retention tell us about the conditions within universities that promote student retention? First and perhaps most clearly institutional commitment is a condition for student retention. Simply put, institutions that are committed to the goal of increasing student retention, especially among excluded groups, seem to find a way to achieve that end. But institutional commitment is more than just words, more than just mission statements issued in glossy brochures; commitment is the willingness to invest the resources and provide the incentives and rewards needed to enhance student retention.

Institutional commitment translates in turn to expectations for student success. High expectations are a condition for student retention. To borrow a commonly used phrase, no student rises to low expectations. Expectations are expressed in a variety of ways. In classrooms they are

expressed in the level of intellectual work expected of students and in the degree to which students see learning in classroom as challenging. Regrettably, it is too often true that universities expect too little of students. At the same time, universities will sometimes hold differing expectations for differing students. This may be expressed in the labels we use to describe groups of students, as for instance contained in the term "remedial" students, or more subtly, but no less effectively, in the way we treat differing students as sometimes happens among faculty and students of different gender or ethnicity. However expressed, research is clear that students quickly pick up expectations and are influenced by the degree to which those expectations validate their presence on campus.

Second, support is a condition that promotes student retention. Research points to two types of support that promote retention, namely 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 developmental education 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.

Third, feedback is a condition for student success. Students are more likely to succeed in settings that assess their skills, monitor their progress, and provide feedback about their learning as they are trying to learn. Immediate and continuous feedback about student progress seems to be key as it allows institutions to intervene and provide support when necessary and enables students to adjust their learning as they learn (see Angelo and Cross, 1993).

Fourth, involvement is a condition for student retention. Educational theorists such as Alexander Astin (1993) and Vincent Tinto (1993) have long pointed to the importance of academic and social integration or what is more commonly referred to as involvement 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.

Fifth and finally, learning is a condition for retention. The more students learn, the more value they find in their learning, the more likely they are to stay and graduate. This is particularly true for more able and motivated students who seek out learning and are, in turn, more likely to

respond to perceived shortcomings in the quality of learning they experience on campus. Least we forget the purpose of higher education is not merely that students are retained, but that they are educated. In the final analysis, student learning drives student retention.

Not surprisingly, an important condition for student learning is involvement. Even among students who persist, students who are more 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 involve all, not just some, students (Tinto, 1998). This is especially the case during the first year of university study when student membership is so tenuous yet so critical to subsequent retention.

To sum up, students are more likely to persist when they find themselves in settings that hold high expectations for their learning, provide needed academic and social support, and actively involve them with other students and faculty in learning. The key concept is that of educational community and the capacity of institutions to establish educational communities that involve all students as equal members.

But getting students involved is no simple matter especially when students commute to campus, work while in college, or have substantial family responsibilities. Unlike students who reside on or very near campus who have few additional responsibilities, those students have little time to spend with their peers and faculty on campus. For them, the classroom may be the only place where they meet each other and the faculty, the only place where engagement in academic matters is possible. Unfortunately, most university classrooms are not involving. Most students experience classrooms, especially the large lecture halls that dominate the first year of our universities, as isolated learners whose learning is detached from that of other students in the class and from the content of other classes in which they are enrolled. For too many classrooms, the experience of learning is still one of isolation and passivity.

It is for this reason that a growing number of universities in the United States have turned their attention to the classroom and asked themselves how they can restructure those places of learning and redirect their support activities to assist students in those places in order to promote student involvement and in turn student learning and retention.

There are a number of reforms now underway in the United States. These include the use of summer bridge and first year transition programs such as the so-called Freshman Seminar; the use of cooperative or collaborative learning and problem-based learning strategies that require students to work together in cooperative groups; the use of learning communities that require students to enroll in courses together and share the experience of learning the curriculum; the use classroom

assessment techniques that provide students and faculty frequent feedback about student learning; and the use of supplemental instruction strategies where academic assistance is connected to specific courses and to specific student academic needs.

Though these reforms are different, they share a number of common attributes that capture the underlying sources of their success. First, they all focus on student learning and the places in which students are asked to learn. They either are located in classrooms or are directed toward the task of learning in the classroom. Second, they all stress shared, connected learning and the importance of educational community. Students are asked to learn together in a coherent manner and form communities that provide social, as well as academic support. Third, when assistance is provided, it is typically connected to the classroom, not isolated from it. In this way, assistance is contextualized in ways that enable students to utilize assistance for learning in the settings in which they are attempting to learn.

What do we know about the effects of these reforms on students? Recent research points to several important outcomes (Tinto, et al. 2001; Tinto & Engstrom, 2002). First, students in settings that stress shared, connected learning tend to form their own self-supporting groups that extended beyond the classroom. Students spend more time together out of class than do students in traditional classes and they do so in ways which students see as supportive. Second, students become more actively involved in classroom learning, even after class. They spend more time learning together both inside and outside the class and in doing so bridge the divide between academic classes and student social conduct that frequently characterizes student life. They tend to learn and make friends at the same time. Third, participation in shared, connected learning environments enhances the quality of student learning or as one student put it "you not only learn more, you learn better." By learning together in ways that includes all voices, everyone's understanding and knowledge is, in the eyes of the participants, enriched. Fourth, as students learn more and see themselves as more engaged both academically and socially, they persist at a substantially higher rate than do comparable students in the traditional curriculum. And this is true for pass rates for remedial students taking the same courses and for retention to the following academic year. Simply put, these reforms, when properly implemented, work. They enhance student learning and in turn student retention. They add another set of tools, beyond the traditional tools of advising, counseling and mentoring, that institutions can use to improve student retention.

What Works: A State and Federal Perspective

Universities in the United States, like those in the rest of the world, are subject, in varying ways and to different degrees, to the actions of external political bodies. Though universities and colleges in the United States are more independent than their peers in most other countries, the actions of external political agencies, federal and state, can also serve to enhance student retention. But unlike most other nations, the national (federal) government in the United States plays a relatively minor role in higher education. Its impact on student retention is largely indirect. Though government policies impact student retention directly through its funding of academic support programs such as the TRIO programs, much of its impact occurs indirectly though its financial aid policies that influence both the amount and form of financial aid students can obtain to help pay for the cost of university attendance.

The role of state governments, however, is much closer to that of governments and ministries of higher education in the rest of the world. Their actions have direct and often immediate impact of efforts to enhance student retention. Until recently, states in the United States have been willing to grant universities and colleges a great deal of autonomy at least as it regards student retention and graduation. That has clearly begun to change. Though state governments have differed in their approach to this issue, several initiatives are worthy of note. First, several states have instituted accountability systems that hold institutions and in turn institutional budgets accountable for their performance including increases in student retention and graduation. Some states, like South Carolina, have developed elaborate formulae to do so, while other states, like California and Kentucky, have used more informal agreements to encourage institutional action. Second, most states have instituted incentive programs that provide institutions incentive grants to encourage the development of innovative programs to increase student retention. Third, in conjunction with Federal funding of TRIO and similar programs for disadvantaged and other targeted groups, most states have provided additional funding for state supported assistance programs that are intended to serve the needs of disadvantaged students. In New York State, these are referred to as Higher Education Opportunity Programs. Fourth, and in my view most encouraging, several states such as Texas, have instituted multi-year initiatives designed specifically to address the continuing gap in access and graduation between majority and minority students.

Regardless of the specific attributes of these state initiatives, most share a common feature. They all recognize that improvement in student retention is ultimately an institutional matter. Though state policies can help, in particular those that provide funding for student support programs, universities ultimately bear the responsibility for improving student retention and graduation. If our institutions do not succeed, little is possible. But for our universities and

colleges to succeed faculty and administrators must be willing to make changes in our institutions and in current forms of practice. In this regard it should be observed that much of the current conversation about helping students succeed in higher education has focused on helping students adjust to the university. Too little attention has focused on the need for our universities to change to adjust to the students they serve. If we are to succeed in our goal of increasing retention and graduation rates of students, in particular those from historically underrepresented groups, both parties, students and institutions, have to adjust and change.

Concluding Thoughts

In closing, let me suggest several possible courses of action that speak to the issue of change. First, we must take seriously the importance of classrooms to student retention and restructure those settings to promote greater student involvement in learning, especially with others. Second, we must also take seriously the task of faculty development and recognize that faculty are not, as a matter of prior education, trained to teach students. As a result, universities must provide faculty with the pedagogical and assessment skills they need to establish conditions in their classrooms that promote student involvement, learning, and retention. Third, we must reward faculty for effective teaching and provide incentives for faculty to innovate in their teaching and work with students. Fourth, our universities must be willing to assess their own actions as they pertain to student retention, in particular how their actions shape the retention of excluded groups. They must be willing to accept the fact that long cherished forms of practice may themselves be partly at fault for the problems we face. In this regard, we have not yet collected the sorts of data, quantitative and qualitative, we need to document the situations we face and assess the effectiveness of our programs in addressing the complex issue of student retention. Finally, our governments, local and national, must finance student support programs and provide incentives for institutions to act. Without conceding the importance of institutional accountability, governments must be willing to invest in university retention programs and provide them the flexibility to produce the reforms needed to achieve the goal of enhanced student retention.

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