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Enhancing student persistence: Lessons learned in the United States (*)

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INTRODUCTION

Student persistence has been a matter of concern in the United States for the past thirty years. Evidence of low rates of persistence among students generally, and among low-income and under-represented groups in particular, has lent support over the years to the development of a range of institutional and state policies to increase persistence and a wide variety of research studies on the attributes of successful practice (NCES, 2003)[1]. As is the case in an increasing number of countries in Europe (Thomas, Cooper, & Quinn, 2003), we too want to better understand how to improve persistence among our students.

In reflecting upon our successes and failures, we have learned two important lessons. First, simply adding on programs to the existing structure does not result in significant gains in persistence. One has to change the structure itself. Second, there is an important linkage between learning and persistence. To address the latter, one has to also address the former.

Regarding the first, too many institutions, in seeking to address the need to improve persistence have adopted what is sometimes called the "add a course" strategy. Need to address the issue of diversity? Add a course on diversity but leave untouched the prevailing culture of university life. Need to address the issue of student persistence, in particular that of new students? Add a freshman seminar or better yet recruit students with better test scores and high school grades, but do not change the character of the first year experience.

Therefore while it is true that many institutions talk of the importance of increasing student persistence, especially during the first year, most universities and colleges have not taken student persistence seriously. They have done little to change the overall character of college, little to alter the prevailing nature of student educational experiences, and therefore little to address the deeper roots of student persistence. As a result, most efforts to enhance student persistence, though successful to some degree, have had less impact than they should or could.

Regarding the second, the linkage between learning and persistence, it is the case that too many past efforts to increase persistence have not involved the faculty. This is the case, in part, be-

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[1] Among students entering public four-year colleges and universities, it is estimated that approximately fifty-three percent earn their bachelor's degree within six years of entry (NCES, 2003, Table 2.0-A).

cause faculty often fail to understand the important relationship between how they teach, how students learn, and how student learning is connected to persistence. As more than one faculty member has said to me "My job is to teach, the students' job is to learn". As a result, most efforts to improve persistence have left untouched the primary experience of university life, namely the experience of learning in the classroom.

Fortunately this is beginning to change. Buoyed by recent research (e.g., Tinto, 1997), there is a growing movement among educators in the United States that argues that to improve student learning and in turn persistence we must move from the view that states that the job of the university and its faculty is to teach students to the view that argues that our work is to help student learn (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Instead of beginning the conversation about student learning with the question "How should we teach students?" we should begin it by asking the question "How should we help students learn?"

The difference between the two questions is not trivial. Whereas the first asks about solely about the role of the faculty as teachers, the second asks about the nature of the learning environment in which we place students and in which faculty teach. Though it does not discount the importance of teaching, it argues that the learning environment that is constructed by the faculty and the institution is as important to student learning as is faculty teaching. It follows from this view that efforts to enhance student learning must also address the nature of the learning environment in which we ask students to learn and in which we teach. The work of the faculty is not just to teach students, but to construct the learning environment in which they teach in ways to promote student learning.

CONDITIONS FOR STUDENT LEARNING

Questions are now being asked about how the learning environment should be changed. What should the learning environment look like? What are the conditions that promote student learning, especially during the first year of university study? The good news is that we already know the answers to these questions, at least as they apply to students in the United States. An extensive body of research has identified a number of the conditions that promote learning, in particular during the students' first year of college when learning is so malleable.

Here the emphasis is placed on the conditions or environments in which we place students rather than on the attributes of students themselves. This is the case because it is too easy to see the absence of student learning as solely the responsibility of students. Too often we tend to "blame the victim" and avoid seeing our own actions as being at least partially responsible for the problems we face. In any event, though some might argue otherwise, student attributes are, for the great majority of institutions, largely beyond immediate institutional control[2]. This is not the case, however, for the learning environments, such as classrooms, in which we place our students and ask our students to learn. Such environments are already within our control, reflecting as they do past decisions, and can be changed if we are serious in our pursuit of student learning and persistence.

So what does research tell us about the conditions that promote student learning?

First, high expectations are a condition for student learning. Student learn best in settings that hold high expectations for their learning and provide clear and effective advising about what is expected of students for their success in ways that apply to all students, not just some. Regarding the former, someone once noted, "no one rises to low expectations". Yet we in the United States have come to understand that students spend less time on their studies out of class than what we deem necessary for successful learning (Kuh, 2003). To be honest, it is my view that students do not study enough in the United States in part because we do not expect enough of them.

[2] Not surprisingly, many institutions see this issue as one of recruitment, of attracting more able and motivate students who themselves are more likely to graduate. But there are only so many able and motivated students and it seems as if every university is seeking to attract the same group of students. In any event, such efforts typically leave untouched the learning environment and do little to ensure that the experience of students will in any way be changed by attracting more able students.

Second, support is a condition for student learning. Environments that provide academic, social, and financial support that is accessible to students are environments in which students are more likely to become successful learners. Here the operative word is become, the important concept that of intellectual development. Least we forget the first year is a period of becoming, a period of intellectual development and transition that requires students make a series of academic and social adjustments to college. Without academic, social, and in some cases financial support, some students are unable to make that transition.

As regards the nature of support, research has demonstrated that support is most effective when it is connected to, not isolated from, the learning environment in which students are asked to learn. Supplemental instruction, for instance, provides academic support that is directly attached to a specific class in order to help students succeed in that class (Bidgood, 1994). As a support strategy, it is most often used for key first year "gateway" courses that are foundational to coursework that follows in subsequent years.

Third, feedback about learning is a condition for student learning. Learning best occurs in settings that provide learners frequent feedback about their learning as they are trying to learn. Here I refer not only to entry assessment of learning skills and early warning systems that alert institutions to students who need assistance, but also to classroom assessment techniques as described by Tom Angelo and Patricia Cross (1993). 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 students are learning. When used frequently, such techniques enable students and faculty alike to adjust their learning and teaching in ways that promote learning.

Fourth, involvement is a condition for student learning and, in turn, for persistence (Astin, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Environments that actively involve students in learning, especially with other students, are environments that yield increased time-on-task, greater quality of effort, and in turn greater persistence and learning. Even among students who persist, students who are more involved in learning, especially with other students, 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. This is especially the case during the first year of university study when student membership is so tenuous yet so critical to subsequent learning and persistence.

Unfortunately, the educational experiences of most university students are not involving, the time they spend on task, that is study outside the classroom, disturbingly low. Learning in the United States is still very much a spectator sport in which faculty talk dominates and where few students actively participate. Most students, especially those in the first year, experience learning as isolated learners whose learning is disconnected from that of others, where the curriculum is experienced as a set of detached, individual courses, one 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. It is little wonder that students seem so uninvolved in learning. Their learning experiences are not very involving.

RESTRUCTURING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

What should university and colleges do? How should they reorganize themselves and construct educational environments that promote student learning? Fortunately, there are a number of strategies for which evidence supports the claim that they enhance student learning and persistence, at least in the United States. These include the use of cooperative or collaborative learning and problem-based learning strategies that require students to work together in cooperative groups; service learning where students engage in service activities that are connected to learning in the classroom, the use of learning communities that require students to enroll in courses together and share the experience of learning a common coherent curriculum; classroom assessment techniques that provide students and faculty frequent feedback about student learning; and the use of supple-

mental 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.

Though each of these reforms have merit, I will focus here on learning communities because it is my view that they offer a particularly effective way of not only addressing the learning needs of students but also providing an alternative structure that enhances the work of both faculty and staff.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Learning communities have a number of characteristics (Gablenick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990)[3]. First, they require students to enroll in two or more courses together. In this way, students are asked to share the experience of taking courses together. But the courses students take are not random or coincidental. They must be linked by an organizing theme or problem that gives meaning to their linkage. This is the case because an important attribute of learning communities is that they serve to build academic as well as social connections between what otherwise would be discrete academic and social experiences. To do so learning communities also require that the faculty who teach in them to collaborate. The point of doing so is to ensure that the experience of the learning community provides for an academic coherence that crosses the borders of the linked courses and the disciplines in which they are located. Finally, an increasing number of learning communities are altering the way students experience learning by employing collaborative and/or problem-based learning pedagogies so that students not only share the curriculum; they also share in groups the experience of learning the shared curriculum.

One of the many virtues of learning communities is that they can be applied to a variety of majors and fields of study, can include a variety of courses, and can be adapted to the needs of varying groups of students. For instance, they are now being adapted, in the United States, to the needs of academically under-prepared students who require academic assistance in order to succeed in college (Malnarich et al., 2004). In this case, one of the linked courses may be a developmental level or study skills course. In other cases, universities are including freshman seminars as part of the learning community. As you know these courses are designed to provide beginning students with the knowledge and skills they need to successfully navigate the new world of the university. The power of these and other arrangements is that they enable the institution to integrate the provision of academic assistance to the social and academic needs of students in ways that is connected to their needs as learners in the classroom.

Research has shown that learning communities, in particular those that are fully integrated yield a number of important benefits for students (Tinto, 2001; Taylor, 2004). First, students tend to develop supportive peer groups and find personal support via the interactions that occur within those groups. As one student noted in an interview, the learning community in which she was enrolled was “like a raft running the rapids of her life”. Second, students in learning communities, especially those that employ collaborative and/or problem-based learning pedagogies, tend to spend more time together both socially and academically. They tend to spend more time engaged in their studies in part because their social

[3] Interested persons should visit the website of the National Learning Communities Project at http://learningcommons.evergreen.edu

engagement inside and outside the classroom leads them to spend more time studying together outside the classroom. As one student told me "class continued even after class". Third, in finding more support and spending more time studying, students in learning communities become more involved in a range of learning activities, learn more, and persist more frequently than do students in more traditional learning settings (Tinto, 2001; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Students in learning communities spend significantly more time on task on a variety of learning domains than do similar students in more traditional learning environments. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, students in learning communities, in particular those that employ active learning strategies, speak of "learning better together". They come to experience and, in turn, value the power of environments that provide for a multi-lens, multi-voice learning experience that require students to "think, re-think, and even re-re-think" about what their learning. As one student noted, "you not only learn more, you learn better".

It should be observed that one of the other benefits of learning communities is that they provide an academic structure within which collaboration among faculty is possible, indeed often required. For learning communities to succeed, faculty 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 way, learning communities can pose a challenge to more traditional views of faculty work because they require faculty to negotiate with other faculty as to the knowledge that is to frame the shared, multi-disciplinary learning community.

LESSONS LEARNED: INSTITUTIONAL ACTIONS TO ENHANCE STUDENT PERSISTENCE

Given the heightened importance European governments are placing on the ability of universities to increase the persistence of their students, one can ask what lessons can be drawn from our experience in the United States. What have we learned from nearly thirty years of effort? What should universities do to increase student persistence?

First, universities and colleges should make shared learning the norm, not the exception, of student educational experience, especially during the critical first year of university study. Whenever and wherever possible students should be asked to learn together and to do so in ways that integrate the knowledge they gain from various courses. They should participate in learning environments that require them to be active in shaping what is learned, that recognizes that knowledge is socially constructed through connection conversations among learners, students and faculty alike, that it is not simply the result of receiving knowledge from others.

Second, your colleges and universities should connect academic and social assistance in its various forms to the curriculum and to student efforts to master the curriculum. Assistance should not isolate students in stand alone efforts (e.g., freshman seminars, remedial coursework) that, however well intended, frequently serve to track students to remedial enclaves that undermine efforts at academic assistance. Here again is where both learning communities and supplemental instruction can be effective for they serve to connect support, as in the form of a freshman seminar, to the curriculum and in that way contextualize academic support[4].

Third, colleges and universities should take seriously the task of assessing student learning and providing frequent feedback to students about their learning, again especially during the first year of university study. Let me be clear. Though testing can be seen as a type of assessment, I am not referring to testing but to assessments such as portfolios, reflective diaries, one-minute papers, and the like, that engage students and faculty alike in shared conversations about what is being learned. Such reflective assessment activities have been shown to enrich student learning. Equally important they so in ways that enable faculty and students to alter their learning behaviors to enhance learning as they seek to learn and teach.

Fourth, your colleges and universities must

[4] Students will often discount the relevance of academic support when it is provided in a stand-alone manner that is discounted from the everyday learning needs of students.

take seriously the task of faculty development and invest the resources needed to see that task to its completion. Least we forget the faculty in higher education, at least in the United States, are the only faculty in education, from kindergarten through graduate school, who are not trained to teach their own students. As a matter of practice, faculty are not knowledgeable of theories of student learning and intellectual development, not trained in a range of pedagogical methods (including lecturing), and not skilled in assessment techniques. This is not to say that there are not many talented faculty whose teaching enhances student learning. There are! But as a matter of practice, our faculty are simply not prepared to construct the sorts of learning environments that best promote student learning. If we want our students to succeed, this must change.

Fifth, colleges and universities should provide meaningful incentives that reward faculty innovation in curriculum and pedagogy. Without such rewards, our conversations about reform are symbolic at best. This is not to say that there are not many faculty who do not already employ some of these strategies or that other faculty would not participate if given the opportunity. Rather it is to say that significant improvements in student persistence will not be achieved without the long-term investment of incentives and rewards.

CLOSING THOUGHT

Finally, let me close by observing that we in the United States as many nations in Europe face many of the same challenges. One that is foremost in the United States is the challenge of equity and of ensuring that all students, regardless of social class, have an equal opportunity to succeed (Thomas & Quinn, 2003). It is for this reason that in seeking to enhance the learning environments for our students we must always ask how we do so in ways that include all students. And when we implement accountability systems, we must ask in what ways that system may inadvertently influence the success of differing students. It is for this reason that I worry, as I am sure you do, about how any accountability system based on institutional performance, however well intended, may lead institutions to restrict access so as to admit only those students deemed most likely to improve their performance. Among other things, such actions not only restrict access but also increase tendencies toward institutional social stratification. Thus my last recommendation, namely that institutional performance be reported for different student groups as well as for institutions generally and be linked to equity goals and the provision of funds to achieve those goals.

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ABSTRACT

Thirty years of experience in trying to enhance student persistence in the United States has taught us some important lessons as to the essential features of success policies and practices. Among other things, we have learned that successful efforts require that universities do more than simply add-on services. They must establish conditions within universities that enable students to find academic and social support, obtain feedback about their work, and become actively involved with other students. No where is that involvement more important than in the classrooms and laboratories of the universities, the one place, perhaps only place, where students meet each other and engage with faculty in learning. An increasingly popular strategy that promotes such involvement is learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlies them. In conclusion, it is argued that any strategy to increase student persistence requires universities to take seriously the task of faculty and staff development and provide the resources, rewards, and incentives to ensure that successful programs are able to grow over the long-term.

Key words: Persistence, retention, policy, learning communities.

RESUMO

Trinta anos de experiência na tentativa de incrementar a permanência dos estudantes nos Estados Unidos ensinou-nos algumas lições no que respeita aos aspectos essenciais de políticas e de práticas de sucesso. Entre outras coisas, aprendemos que para que os esforços sejam bem sucedidos é preciso que as universidades façam mais do que simplesmente criar serviços. Devem estabelecer-se nas universidades condições que permitam aos estudantes encontrar suporte académico e social, obter retro-informação sobre o seu trabalho e envolverem-se activamente com outros estudantes. Em nenhum outro local das universidades o envolvimento é mais importante do que nas salas de aula e nos laboratórios, os locais, talvez os únicos locais, onde os estudantes se conhecem uns aos outros e se implicam com a Faculdade na aprendizagem. Uma estratégia, cada vez mais aceite, que promove tal envolvimento são as comunidades de aprendizagem e a pedagogia colaborativa que lhes subjaz. Em conclusão, argumenta-se que qualquer estratégia tendo em vista aumentar a permanência dos estudantes requer que as universidades levem a sério a tarefa de desenvolver a faculdade e os seus agentes e disponibilize os recursos, recompensas e incentivos para assegurar que intervenções eficazes aumentem no futuro.

Palavras-chave: Permanência, retenção, política, comunidades de aprendizagem.