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Higher education's revolving door: confronting the problem of student drop out in US colleges and universities

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The high rate of student dropout between the first and second year of college is a major concern for the majority of US colleges and universities. But dropout (or stop out) from higher education affects students in different ways, depending upon a number of factors. Although for the last 30 years, educational researchers have studied the dropout phenomenon, research to date has tended to focus upon student characteristics or the impact of external environments. Little research exists that explores the role of the college or university environment—especially the classroom itself—on student persistence. And while college and university educators have employed a variety of programs to improve retention—for example, first-year seminars, learning communities, and Supplemental Institution—retention rates remain disappointingly static. A final frontier yet to be explored in retention research is the basic structure of higher education, especially the way instruction is designed and delivered.

Keywords: *College freshman; Persistence; Dropout prevention; College dropouts; University students*

Overview

Over the past 20 years, few topics in American higher education have commanded as much attention from as many college and university administrators as student retention.[1] In fact, only a handful of the most elite liberal arts colleges and research universities have escaped what, for many US campuses, has become an overriding obsession to stem a 'tidal wave' of student drop out, which is at its highest level between the first and second year. A parallel concern relates to the less than 50% national five-year rate of baccalaureate degree completion, a rate that has declined over the past 10 years (Astin & Oseguera, 2002) and is significantly worse for publicly funded, rather than privately funded, colleges and universities. Even the annual collegiate comparisons published by *US News and World Report* have added both first-to-second-year retention and graduation statistics to their system of ranking baccalaureate-level colleges and universities. This inclusion of retention/graduation statistics in an overall measure of institutional quality is a clear reversal from the 1950s and 1960s when high drop-out rates were often considered a mark of institutional status.

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Taken at face value, these widely reported statistics are troubling. But many retention researchers are equally troubled by the fact that national dropout and graduation data, generally reported at the institutional level, are flawed and probably overstated, especially for baccalaureate institutions. Available institutional-level data fail to discriminate between, transfer and short-term stop out, and they do not take into account personal goals of students, which may or may not include persistence to graduation at the institution where the student entered. In contrast, a recent study using national student-level longitudinal data finds that although only 47% of students entering a baccalaureate institution will have graduated from that same institution in five years, another 29% of students are still enrolled or have graduated from another institution (Choy, 2002).

In the United States, the most significant dropout occurs at two-year, associate-degree-granting public colleges (i.e. community colleges)—a sector that enrolls almost one-half of all undergraduate students in the United States. These institutions are 'open admission' and provide a smorgasbord of curricular offerings from arts and sciences to technical and occupational courses. The national aggregate first-to-second year retention rate for public two-year institutions, measured at the institutional level, is approximately 50% (compared with 73% for all four-year institutions) (American College Testing Program, 1998), and thus far no national research effort has been able to track two-year students as individuals.

Since the late 1990s, as a result of public policy decisions to encourage more students to begin higher education in the two-year sector where costs are significantly lower, many community colleges have faced exponential growth. Therefore, their current most pressing problem is providing classroom space and basic services to a steady stream of entering students. For these institutions, concerns about retention are, for the time being, taking a back seat.

What is at stake?

Dropout (or stop out) from higher education affects students differently, depending upon their level of maturity, college readiness, or personal feelings of belonging in college. Whereas the decision to leave a college or university may be permanent for some students—especially those who feel marginal in the first place—other students will take time off to clarify academic and career decisions, deal with external circumstances, or simply grow up.

But whether dropout hinders or helps students in the long run, its effects on institutions can be grim, if not life threatening. Small private (non-governmentally controlled) institutions, both secular and church-affiliated, are often entirely 'tuition dependent', and the loss of even a few students, whatever the reason, can be catastrophic to the operating budget. An increasing number of state legislatures are threatening to tie institutional funding to the percentage of students who graduate—a potential blow to those public colleges and universities that enroll large numbers of at-risk students or experience high rates of transfer. And then there is the matter of institutional reputation. No American college or university wants to be known for its high rate of dropout.

These concerns taken together have spawned a growing 'retention industry' in the United States, made up of corporations, organizations, and individual consultants—all selling their products and advice to the willing consumer. And in recent years, retention has become part of a larger area of study and practice called 'enrollment management'. Many colleges and universities now have vice-presidents or vice-chancellors who are assigned the responsibilities of marketing, recruiting, admitting, and retaining students (Hossler & Anderson, 2004). In fact, at least one major university, the University of Miami in Florida, offers a graduate degree in enrollment management.

How US scholars and researchers have responded

Over the past three decades university researchers have designed models that describe or predict student dropout (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1993; Cabrera *et al.*, 1992), and they have also studied the types of institutional environments most likely to correlate with high rates of persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Astin, 1993). Undoubtedly the most well known of these models was developed by Vincent Tinto and has served as a sort of archetype against which other models are compared and contrasted. Tinto conceptualized retention as a three-stage process resulting in varying degrees of 'social and academic integration' that determine whether or not students remain in college. This important theory has been the subject of much revision and various debates that revolve around: (a) which element—social integration or academic integration—is more important for what types of students (Braxton, 2000); (b) whether Tinto's model actually includes all the variables needed to understand student dropout, especially for non-traditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera *et al.*, 1990); or (c) whether today's students should be expected to achieve Tinto's three stages of a successful higher education career—separation, transition, and incorporation. William Tierney (1992), for one, argues that it is both unrealistic and unreasonable to expect many of today's students to 'separate' from their culture and families of origin in order to achieve 'incorporation' into, or conformity with, college norms and expectations. But, despite its perceived flaws, Tinto's model has, through the years, encouraged educators to acknowledge the academic and social dimensions of success in higher education and the complexity of the retention problem.

Retention research to date has focused primarily on the characteristics of the students or their external environments. With only a few exceptions, little scrutiny has been given to the way the college or university experience is organized and delivered. Furthermore, 'the experience of the classroom has been largely absent from studies of student persistence and virtually ignored in theories of student departure' (Tinto, 2002, p. 81). Gardner (2001) has been instrumental in calling attention to the probable role that myriad institutional structures, policies and practices play in affecting the learning and retention of first-year students. But the research community has yet to focus its lens on these most important aspects of the college or university experience, which include the way academic courses are sequenced, course attendance policies, the structure of academic advising, grading

practices, selection and rewarding of faculty who teach first-year students, and so on.

Finally, a great deal of research has been undertaken by institutions themselves in order to assess the impact of various piecemeal programs on retention. Although such research may validate the use of particular programs in particular settings, studies often lack experimental rigor and are therefore less likely to be published and available to the higher education community at large.

Practitioners have used the broad parameters of national retention research to design a plethora of structural or programmatic interventions designed to improve retention. The overwhelming majority of these programs are targeted to first-year students, as the first year of higher education is the time during which the largest percentage of drop out occurs. Many of these initiatives have been correlated with significant retention improvements at the institutional level, but national dropout rates remain static—a fact that is less disturbing when the recent changes in the nature of college students are taken into account. As more students with a variety of at-risk characteristics enter colleges and universities, educators find it necessary to utilize new structures and to imbed various forms of support throughout the undergraduate years. Such initiatives carry significant costs but have helped keep retention rates stable in the face of these changing 'input' characteristics.

Who is at risk for early departure from higher education?

In the United States, as in many other countries, academic preparation, socioeconomic status, family participation in higher education and being female are good predictors (in aggregate) of whether students will persist in higher education (Choy, 2002). There are also other attitudinal characteristics that are harder to determine, but have strong predictive power. One characteristic is what Tinto (1993) describes as commitment—commitment of students to a particular institution and commitment to a personal educational goal. The most prestigious colleges and universities—those with strong academic reputations, selective admissions policies, massive resources, supportive alumni and winning athletic teams—are most likely to engender a high level of institutional commitment. And goal commitment is more likely to be realized as a function of student maturity and academic or career focus.

In spite of the predictive nature of poor academic preparation, however, the majority of drop out in the United States does not result from academic failure. In fact, many institutions experience a rate of attrition that is more or less even across all levels of student academic performance. The reasons the best students sometimes leave may be boredom, lack of academic challenge, poor 'institutional fit' (Tinto, 1990), failure to connect to the campus social systems, financial problems, general dissatisfaction or desire to transfer elsewhere. In general, contemporary American college students are not known for their 'product loyalty'. They are on a continual search for the 'best deal' or 'greener pastures', and higher education institutions are happy to oblige. With over 4000 competitive postsecondary institutions from which to choose, many American students at all levels of academic ability exercise their right to transfer—the only penalty being an occasional loss of some credit hours.

Confronting student dropout

As student dropout has become an increasingly serious problem in the United States, institutions have adopted a range of response strategies. These strategies vary widely across institutional types and are often a function of perceived student needs as well as available resources. Perhaps the most common initial response is to charge student services professionals with the development of a variety of out-of-class 'retention programs'. Literally thousands of such programs, many of them designed especially for first-year students, have emerged in recent years and include various clubs and organizations, residential programs, expanded campus orientations, convocations, community service and events that build 'school spirit'. These activities are grounded in historic campus traditions but are also informed by more recent research on the correlation between student persistence and involvement, the forming of peer relationships and group affiliation (Astin, 1993). Although such activities may enrich the academic experience for traditional-aged, residential students, they generally have no perceptible impact either on older students or on students who live or work off campus. And, of course, students who are participating in distance forms of higher education—whether online or 'on-ground'—are unable to take any advantage of out-of-class activities that are bound to a fixed time and place. In addition, when retention is perceived to be the 'business' of student services, course instructors are in essence relieved of any responsibility to relate retention to what happens in the classroom or in other teaching/learning settings.

Many colleges and universities have focused their retention initiatives on 'at-risk' students, however those students are designated. The majority of American campuses offer what are termed 'early-alert' initiatives—intrusive attention to students who perform poorly on assessments during the first few weeks of the term (Barefoot, 2002). Such students will be contacted and referred to tutoring or counseling services. In order to improve access, retention and academic performance of underrepresented populations certain large education systems such as the 16 colleges and universities of the City University of New York offer special assistance—financial, personal and academic—to students who are considered economically and educationally disadvantaged. 'Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge', for example, is a higher education opportunity program at the City University of New York's four-year campuses that begins before students matriculate and continues through the undergraduate years (City University of New York, 2003).

Although efforts to target special at-risk populations are necessary, a decision to limit outreach to those populations may be, in fact, short-sighted. Because dropout has so many potential root causes, 'average' or even above-average students may also benefit from special assistance during the sometimes difficult transition to higher education.

A number of institutions have sought to improve student retention by appointing a campus 'retention director'. Charging someone with primary responsibility for retention may serve to focus needed attention on the retention problem or may simply absolve everyone else, especially course instructors, of any sense of responsibility. Some retention directors, especially individuals who have authority or are recognized 'opinion leaders', have been highly effective in marshalling resources and

responding to a variety of student and instructor needs and concerns. Others, especially those who have little status and no history of leadership within the institution, act in name only and do little to raise institutional consciousness about student dropout.

A commonly used, but more ambitious, retention tool is a special term-length, first-year course called a first-year seminar (i.e. freshman seminar, student success course), which is currently offered in some form by over 90% of American colleges and universities (Barefoot, 2002). The precise nature of first-year seminars will vary depending upon the particular institution, but their common goal is to increase both 'social and academic integration' (Tinto, 1993) of first-year students and thereby improve rates of student retention. Course content will generally include attention to study skills and habits, time management and use of campus resources including the library, learning assistance centers and campus technology. But often these areas of emphasis will be folded into a 'theme-based' course on a topic of the instructor's choosing. Seminars have been offered on such diverse and unusual topics as 'The American Dream', 'From Homer to Hobbits', 'The Mating Game', 'Time in Contemporary Music' and 'Vegetarianism', just to name a few (Barefoot & Fidler, 1994; Mercer, 2002).

Whatever their topic focus, in order to be an effective retention tool, first-year seminars should be small in size (15–20 students) and characterized by high levels of interaction (Fidler, 1991). At many institutions these first-year courses become a sort of antidote to the rest of a much more impersonal first-year experience where students are rarely known by name or recognized for their individual characteristics. Numerous campus-specific studies have found a positive correlation between participation in a first-year seminar and persistence, but again few of these studies meet rigorous standards of experimental design and few have been published (Barefoot, 1998).

Another curricular structure linked with improved retention is Supplemental Instruction (SI). SI was developed at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and has been disseminated widely to many other colleges and universities in the United States as well as the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa, and several Scandinavian countries. The essence of SI is the linking of a weekly supplemental class session, facilitated by an upper-level 'master student', to certain high-risk courses, defined as those courses in which at least 30% of the students earn a D, F, or W (course withdrawal). The supplemental class offers students the opportunity to spend more time grappling with difficult content and clarifying misconceptions. SI classes are open to students at all levels of academic performance, and participation in a sufficient number of SI sessions has been correlated with higher grades and student retention (Martin & Arendale, 1993). SI has also been recently adapted to a video format. In Video Supplemental Instruction, lectures are videotaped and students are able to watch the tape in a group, facilitated by a master student. The students can stop the tape and rewind whenever necessary to replay and discuss particularly difficult parts of the lecture material (Martin & Hurley, 2004).

The current structural innovation that seems to be correlated with the most significant retention improvements is the 'learning community'—a structure designed to link courses across the curriculum. Learning communities, which are now offered to at least some first-year students at about 60% of American colleges and

universities (Barefoot, 2002), co-enroll a small cohort of students (<25) in two, three, four or even five courses. Ideally, instructors who teach the linked courses will collaborate in connecting course content. Some of the learning communities have overall themes; others link a remedial course or 'English as a Second Language' course with 'regular' courses in academic disciplines.

Learning communities have enjoyed special success in commuter institutions because they facilitate student interaction and involvement during the classes themselves. Simply attending two or more classes with the same 24 or so other students almost inevitably results in the development of friendships and a stronger sense of 'belonging' at the institution. Residential campuses, especially large research universities, have also found the learning community to be a successful strategy for carving a large campus into more manageable, student-friendly units. Some residential campuses have even linked learning communities with residence life, so that students in a community will live together in a residential setting (Levine, 1999).

The University of Phoenix, the largest distance-education provider in the United States, enrolling over 125,000 students, credits its seven-year, 65% degree-completion rate to a number of factors including cohort-group instruction. Whether in online settings on in classroom environments, all instruction takes place in cohort groups of about 15 students. These groups take all prescribed courses in lock-step fashion and, according to the current chief academic officer, form tight-knit learning communities that result in lifelong friendships (C. Swenson, personal communication 24 March 2003).

Measuring retention in a distance environment

In the United States, various forms of distance education are proliferating dramatically (Tabs, 2003). Not only are there higher education providers whose primary, if not exclusive, business is distance education (e.g. University of Phoenix, Kaplan Higher Education Corporation, Western Governor's University, Jones International University); other traditional campuses also offer a variety of online or distance courses. A recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* explored this growing enterprise and focused especially on the retention dilemma:

> No national statistics exist yet about how many students complete distance programs or courses, but anecdotal evidence and studies by individual institutions suggest that course-completion and program-retention rates are generally lower … than in their face-to-face counterparts. Some administrators and faculty members attribute the lower rates … to demographics … while others blame the nature of distance education, arguing that online and television courses will never be able to supply the personal interaction that some students crave. (Carr, 2000, p. 1, online version)

But the article goes on to argue that for individual students, especially those whose busy lives would not permit them to attend a traditional institution, distance education may, in fact, improve their likelihood of completing higher education. Although administrators quoted in the article agree that course completion rates in distance courses are often 10–20 percentage points lower than in traditional courses, they continue to be optimistic, expressing 'confidence that the increasing sophistication of technology will ultimately improve retention in distance education' (Carr, 2000, p. A39).

Where do we go from here?

While many programs, courses and new structures have reduced student dropout to some degree, they have neither yielded consistent results nor markedly changed the overall retention picture. It could be argued that while many of the strategies are necessary, they are not sufficient if we are to make significant inroads into the retention problem. A final frontier that is only beginning to be explored is the process of instruction whether in face-to-face or distance settings—not instruction in a special purpose course such as a first-year seminar, but in history, calculus, composition, psychology, biology and the like that comprise the bulk of any student's experience.To date, the impact that various course formats and styles of instruction may or may not have on student persistence has, in the United States, been woefully ignored. We have direct evidence that students are 'dissatisfied' with classes in which there are hundreds of other students, that students dislike the lecture and find much of first-year course work 'irrelevant' and boring (Sax *et al.*, 2002). We know that although timely feedback on academic performance is motivational for new students, only about 50% of instructors provide such feedback (Barefoot, 2000). And we have evidence that many students, especially students of color and women, prefer a style of instruction that can be characterized as 'relational' rather than abstract and impersonal—a direct contrast with the way that much first-year instruction is designed (Claxton & Murrell, 1987). But we can only assume how these factors actually impact a student's decision to either stay in college or depart for those ubiquitous greener pastures. Academic courses, in general, have been sacred cows or 'assessment-free zones' that have escaped the kinds of scrutiny we give to other more peripheral, less essential retention activities.

A related problem is that many, if not most, US higher education instructors in traditional academic disciplines are themselves essentially unaware of retention research and believe that the current emphasis on student retention is just one more nail in the coffin of 'academic standards'. And on some campuses, where retention is a driving concern, course instructors often feel direct pressure to hold on to any and all students, despite their academic record.

In the United States, those of us who are concerned about student persistence acknowledge that our combined efforts have yielded only partial success, and we are now attempting to reframe the discussion by focusing on institutional excellence as defined by student learning and engagement, and to consider retention a by-product of institutional excellence rather than a front-line objective. We believe that it is far easier to have a conversation with course instructors about possibly changing their pedagogical style or interacting more directly with students if the outcome is perceived to be a greater degree of learning, rather than the somewhat low-level goal of merely keeping students in a particular college or university. But before we can really move forward, we need more knowledge and more evidence about howteaching affects engaged learning and, in turn, how both teaching and learning affect persistence. We are beginning to build a body of evidence using the National Survey of Student Engagement, but the results of that survey, which is based on student self-report, often raise as many questions as they provide answers (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning, 2002).

A final thought. Perhaps the various complexities inherent in the organization of

higher education cause many of us to develop a sort of tunnel vision. In an ostensible attempt to improve both retention and graduation rates, educators often spend their energies changing narrow and peripheral pieces of the student experience while the most serious problems may be rooted in the basic structure of the higher education enterprise. While we will never be able to predict or control dropout with 100% certainty, the dynamic nature of entering students requires that we take a hard look at our cherished structures, especially the ways in which we deliver instruction. Such scrutiny will not be easy; it may in fact expose our most deeply held values about the nature of higher education. But it is an essential next step if we hope to further improve both student learning and persistence.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. Defining 'retention'. Although there are many variations, in US higher education 'retention' is most commonly used to describe students' remaining at a single college or university (or in an academic program) from the first to the second year. Some writers use the terms 'retention' and 'persistence' interchangeably. However, in recent years, others have drawn a slight distinction—using persistence to indicate retention for more than one year, whether at the college of entry or at another institution.

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