As part of the Foundations of Excellence process, Purdue has made a commitment to creating a culture that promotes and supports student success. That commitment is defined by the following philosophy statement:

> At Purdue, we believe the first-year experience should enable students to build a solid foundation for success, not only at the University, but also throughout their lives.

> Through learning experiences and support services, both in and beyond the classroom, students grow intellectually and develop personally. They acquire knowledge and skills to succeed academically, build confidence and resilience to accept and embrace challenges, and develop their personal and academic identity.

> Students are welcomed into and expected to participate actively in a vibrant and intellectually challenging community within which all members feel a sense of belonging, irrespective of personal or group status, culture, or ethnicity. They share interests and activities with one another and learn to think, act, and remain openly respectful of diverse views and experiences.

> Students are challenged to become globally prepared, interdependent, critical thinkers, with an ever-increasing ability to locate, assess, and apply knowledge resources that help them develop as whole, productive citizens and leaders on campus and beyond.

> As a Purdue community, we hold ourselves accountable for providing experiences, support services, access to faculty and staff, and a safe learning environment whereby students can achieve these goals.

With this philosophy statement in mind:

1. What is your personal role in ensuring student success?

2. What specific roles do faculty have in ensuring student success?

3. What specific roles do staff have in ensuring student success?

Taking Student Success Seriously: Rethinking the First Year of College

Vincent Tinto
Syracuse University

Introduction

Many colleges speak of the importance of increasing student retention, of promoting student success[1]. Indeed, quite a few invest substantial resources in programs designed to achieve that end. Some institutions even hire consultants who promise a proven formula for successful retention. But for all that effort, most institutions do not take student retention seriously. They treat student success, like so many other issues, as one more item to add to the list of issues to be addressed by the institution. They adopt what Parker calls the "add a course" strategy in addressing the issues that face them. Need to address the issue of diversity? Add a course in diversity studies, but do not alter the nature of institutional climates. Need to address the issue of student retention, in particular that of new students? Add a freshman seminar or perhaps a mentoring program, but leave untouched the educational character of the first year.

Therefore while it is true that retention programs abound on our campuses, most institutions have not taken student retention seriously. They have done little to change the essential character of college, little to alter the prevailing character of student educational experience, and therefore little to address the deeper roots of student attrition. As a result, most efforts to enhance student success, though successful to some degree, have had more limited impact than they should or could.

What would it mean for institutions to take student success seriously? And what would it mean if the object of our concern were low-income students? Among other things, it would mean that institutions would stop tinkering at the margins of institutional life and make enhancing student success the linchpin about which they organize their activities. They would move beyond the provision of add-on services and establish those educational conditions within the institution that promote the success of all, not just some, students. To be serious about student success, institutions would recognize that the roots of attrition lie not only in their students and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings, now assumed to be natural to higher education, in which they ask students to learn.

---

[1] Unlike the common usage of the term student retention that implies that students are successful only when they stay and eventually graduate, the term student success allows us to include the possibility that students may be successful even if they do not finish their course of study at a particular institution (e.g. transfer). More importantly, it enables us to take account of learning and success in individual courses and allows us to make the argument that student success, however defined, is built upon success in one course at a time,

Conditions for Student Success

What is to be done? What should institutions do to increase success, especially for low-income students? The good news is that we already know the answer to these questions. An extensive body of research identifies the character of the settings or conditions within institutions and in turn the actions institutions can take that promote student success, in particular during the students' first year of college. Here the emphasis is on the conditions in which we place students rather than on the attributes of students themselves. 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 conditions in which institutions place their students. Such conditions are already within institutional control, their attributes already reflective of decisions made and of actions taken or not taken. They can be changed if institutions are serious in their pursuit of student persistence.

Research points to six conditions within institutions that are supportive of student success; namely commitment, expectations, support, feedback, involvement, and learning.

Commitment

First and perhaps most clearly, institutional commitment is a condition for student success. Simply put, institutions that are committed to the goal of increasing student success, especially among low-income and under-represented students, seem to find a way to achieve that end. But institutional commitment is more than just words, more than just mission statements issued in elaborate brochures; it is the willingness to invest the resources and provide the incentives and rewards needed to enhance student success. Without such commitment, programs for student success may begin, but rarely prosper over the long-term.

Expectations

Second, expectations, specifically high expectations, are a condition for student success. Quite simply, no student rises to low expectations. Regrettably, it is too often the case that universities expect too little of students, especially during the critical first year of college. Indeed a recent national study by Kuh (2003) indicates that first year students spend less time on their studies out of class than what we deem necessary for successful learning. They simply do not study enough. It is my view that this is the case in part because we do not expect enough of them nor construct educational settings that require them to study enough.

---

[2] This is not to say that individual attributes do not matter. Of course they do. In some cases they matter greatly. We all know of stories of students who by shear drive of personality succeed against what are for most students seemingly insurmountable barriers. Yet there are other students who do not succeed even when placed in settings that favor success. Nevertheless, though some might argue otherwise, student attributes such as personality, drive or motivation are, for the great majority of institutions, largely beyond immediate institutional control.

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. This is precisely what Rendon (1994) was referring to in her research on validation and success of non-traditional, first-generation, college students and what Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) was referring to in his study of microaggressions.

Expectations can also be expressed in concrete ways through formal and informal advising. Knowing the rules and regulations and the informal networks that mark campus life are part and parcel of student success. Yet it remains the case that formal advising remains a "hit and miss" affair; some students are lucky and find the information they need, while others are not. The same can be said of the informal advising, the sharing of accumulated knowledge that goes on within a campus among and between faculty, staff, and students. Again some students are able to locate that knowledge, often through informal networks of peers, while others are not (Attinasi, 1989). This is particularly important to the success of the many students who either begin college undecided about their major and/or change their major during college.[3] The inability to obtain needed advice during the first year or at the point of changing majors can undermine motivation, increase the likelihood of departure, and for those who continue, result in increased time to degree completion. Though students may make credit progress, they do not make substantial degree-credit progress.

Support

Third, support is a condition that promotes student success. Research points to three types of support that promote success; namely academic, social, and financial. As regards academic support, it is unfortunately the case that 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.

---

[3] It is estimated that among four-year college students nearly two-thirds either begin undecided or change their majors at least once during college.

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 (Bowles and Jones, 2003). 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.

Feedback

Fourth, monitoring and feedback is a condition for student success. Students are more likely to succeed in settings that provide faculty, staff, and students frequent feedback about their performance. 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 such as those described by Angelo and Cross (1993) and those that involve the use of learning portfolios. These techniques are not to be confused with testing but with forms of assessment, such as the well-known "one-minute" paper, that provide students and faculty alike information on what is or is not being learned in the classroom. When used frequently, such techniques enable students and faculty alike to adjust their learning and teaching in ways that promote learning. When implemented in portfolio form that requires continuous reflection, assessment can also deeply enrich learning.

Involvement

Fifth, involvement, or what has been frequently been described as academic and social integration, is a condition for student success (e.g. Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993). Quite simply, the more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely are they to persist and graduate. This is especially true during the first year of university study when student membership is so tenuous yet so critical to subsequent learning and persistence. Involvement during that year serves as the foundation upon which subsequent affiliations and engagements are built.

Nowhere is involvement more important than in the classrooms and laboratories of the campus, again especially during the first year of college. This is the case for two reasons. First, the classroom may be the only place students meet each other and the faculty. Least we forget, most students commute to college and a majority work while in college. For them and for many others, the classroom is often the only place where they meet other students and the faculty. If involvement does not occur in those smaller places of engagement, it is unlikely it will easily occur elsewhere. Second, learning is central to the college experience and the root source of student success. Involvement in classroom learning, especially with other students, leads to greater quality of effort, enhanced learning, and in turn heightened student success (Tinto, 1997). 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 (Endo and Harpel, 1982). It is for these reason that so much of the literature on institutional retention, student learning and development speaks of the importance of building educational communities that involve all, not just some, students (Tinto, 1993).

Learning

Six, and most importantly, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that foster learning. Learning has always been the key to student persistence. Students who learn are students who stay. Institutions that are successful in building settings that educate all their students, all not just some, are successful in graduating their students. Again, involvement seems to be the key. Students who are actively involved in learning, that is who spend more time on task, especially with others, are more likely to learn and, in turn, more likely to stay and graduate.

To sum up, students are more likely to succeed when they find themselves in settings that are committed to their success, hold high expectations for their success, provide needed academic, social, and financial support, frequent feedback, and actively involve them, especially with other students and faculty in learning. The key concept is that of learning and educational community and the capacity of institutions to establish educational communities that actively involve all students in learning. And at no time is the need for educational community more pressing than in the critical first-year of college.

Promoting Student Success: Thinking About Institutional Practice

Unfortunately, the educational experiences of most first-year students are not involving, the expectations for their learning not very high and the time they spend on task disappointingly low. Learning is still very much a spectator sport in which faculty talk dominates and where few students actively participate. Most first-year students experience learning as isolated learners whose learning is disconnected from that of others, where what may be learned in one course is unconnected to what is being taught in another. It is small wonder that students seem so uninvolved in learning. Their learning experiences are not very involving.

Let me suggest then that any institutional policy to enhance student persistence must address issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and the skills faculty bring to the task of educating students, especially in the classroom.[4] It must address the fact that faculty in higher education are the only faculty in education who are literally not trained to teach their own students. In the same manner that universities are beginning to require training for new teaching assistants, they should do likewise for new faculty and do so in conjunction with promotion and tenure systems that take teaching seriously. At the same time, institutional policy must provide for incentives and rewards for faculty, as well as staff, to work together to construct educational settings that promote the active involvement and learning of all students. It must encourage the building of collaborative partnerships across campus to tap the many skills of both faculty and student affairs professionals (Engstrom and Tinto, 2000).

---

[4] Least we forget, most students either commute to college and/or work while in college. For these students, indeed for students generally, the classroom may be the one, perhaps only place where students meet faculty and student peers, the one place where they engage in learning. If involvement is to occur, and it must, it must arise in and around the classrooms of the campus. It must lead students not only to get involved, but also do so with others in ways that promote learning.

In other words, the policy I have in mind must address the core mission of the institution and those responsible for that mission. It must be located at the center, not periphery, of institutional life and must commit the institution to place the assessment and promotion of student learning and success at the top of their priority list. In effect, institutions must hold themselves and their various schools, departments, and in turn faculty and staff accountable for enhancing student success. Unfortunately, too many institutional programs that seek to promote student success are at the margins of institutional life. They are often directed by part-time instructional staff or by student affairs staff with little connection to the academic life of the institution. Though those programs may help, they do little to alter the primary experience of college, namely that of the classroom and of learning.[5]

It is for this reason that I have long advocated the use of learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlies them as an important component of any institutional policy to enhance student success (Gablenick, et al., 1990; Taylor, et al. 2004). Unlike other so-called "retention" programs that sit at the margins of student academic experience, learning communities seek to transform that the essential character of that experience and thereby address the deeper roots of student persistence (Tinto, 1997; Cross, 1998). They serve to actively involve students in learning with other students within the classroom and thereby promote both social and academic involvement (Tinto, 1997, 2003; Zhao and Kuh, 2004). For under-prepared students, learning communities also serve to integrate academic assistance to the curriculum so that students get academic support and make degree credit progress at the same time. In so doing they greatly enhance the impact of academic support not only on student learning but also on student motivation to persist (Tinto, 1998).[6]

What then about the first year of college? If institutions were serious in their pursuit of student success they would restructure that critical year of transition and foundation such that shared connected learning among students is the norm, not the exception, of the first year experience; where learning between courses are connected in ways to produce deeper, more powerful learning experiences; where academic support is connected to, not removed, from the classroom and students' need to learn in the classroom; where feedback to students, faculty, and support staff about student learning occur early and frequently so that students, as well as faculty and staff, can adjust their behaviors to promote student success; where faculty and staff would have the skills and knowledge needed to promote the success of their students; and where it is expected that every student will excel, not merely get, by during the first year.

---

[5] In some respects, the same may be said of many first year programs such as the widely used freshman seminar. Though the freshman seminar has had some success in increasing persistence, it is regrettable that too many institutions still use the freshman seminar as a separate, stand-alone course unrelated to the academic life of the institution. It is employed as a type of educational vaccine. By leaving the freshman seminar at the margins of institutional life, by treating it as an add-on to the real business of the college, institutions implicitly assume that they can "cure" attrition by "inoculating" students with a dose of educational assistance without changing the rest of the curriculum and the ways students experience that curriculum.

[6] Too many developmental education programs serve to marginalize and sometimes stigmatize those students by locating them in standalone classes that are disconnected from the regular curriculum and bear little, if any, degree credit.

Concluding Thought

The view expressed here is, in many respects, no different than that expressed by Robert Barr and John Tagg in their 1995 article "From Teaching to Learning." In that article they argued that in order to substantially improve student learning 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 and Tagg, 1995). Instead of beginning the conversation about student learning with the question "How should we teach students?" they argue that 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 and in turn student success must also address the nature of the learning environment in which we ask students to learn and in which we teach and in which support is provided. The work of the faculty is not just to teach students, nor support staff just to provide support, but together to construct the learning environments in which they teach and provide support in ways the promote student learning. To take student success seriously is to take the issue of structure and environment seriously and ask, as we do here, how institutions can change the nature of those learning environments, especially during the first year of college, to more effectively promote student success.

References:

Angelo, T. and P. Cross (1993), *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Astin, A. (1993), *What Matters in College?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Attinasi, L. C. Jr. (1989). Getting in: Mexican American's perceptions of university attendance and implications for freshman year persistence. *Journal of Higher Education, 60*, 247-277.

Barr, R, and J. Tagg (1995), "From teaching to learning: A new paradigm for Undergraduate Education." *Change,* November--December, 13-25.

Bowles, T. J., and J. Jones. (2003). The effect of supplemental instruction on retention: A bivariate probit model. *College Student Retention: Research, Theory, and Practice, 5*, 431-439.

Cross, P. (1998), "Why learning communities? Why now? *About Campus,* 3, 4-11.

Endo, J. and R. Harpel (1982). The effect of student-faculty interaction on students' educational outcomes. *Research in Higher Education, 16*, 115-135.

Engstrom, C. and V. Tinto, (2000), "Building Collaborative Partnerships with Student Affairs to Enhance Student Learning " in M. Barr (ed.) *Handbook for Student Affairs Administrators.* San Francisco, Jossey Bass).

Gablenick, F., J. MacGregor, R. Matthews, and B.L. Smith. (1990). *Learning communities: Creating connections among students, faculty, and disciplines* (Vol. 41). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kuh, G. (2003). What we're learning about student engagement from NSSE. *Change, 35*, 24-32.

Rendon, L. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education, 19*, 13-52.

Solorzano, D., M. Ceja, and T. Yosso. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *journal of Negro Education, 69*, 60-73.

Taylor, K., W. Moore, J. MacGregor, and J. Lindblad. (2004). *Learning community research and assessment: What we know now*. Olympia: The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at The Evergreen State College.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition.* (2nd ed.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *Journal of Higher Education, 68*, 599-623.

Tinto, V. (1998). *Adapting learning communities to the needs of remedial education students.* Paper presented at the Rethinking Remedial Education, Stanford University.

Tinto, V. (2003), *Learning Better Together*. Higher Education Monograph Series, No. 2. Higher Education Program, Syracuse University.

Zhao, C. and G. Kuh (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education, 45*, 115-138.