



Reflections on Student Persistence

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For years, researchers like myself in developing theories to explain student retention have almost always taken on the perspective of the university. We have asked, as they do, what can they do to improve student retention. Understandably it is in the interests of universities to do so as increased retention leads to a range of beneficial outcomes not the least of which is heightened revenue. But when one speaks to students, looks at the issue of retention from their perspective and sees the university through their eyes, one does not hear students speak of being retained. They speak instead of persisting. Their interest is not in being retained but persisting to degree completion even if it means transferring to another institution to do so. The difference in these perspectives is not trivial. Indeed, it lies at the heart of the university's ability to further increase retention and completion especially for those who have been historically underserved in higher education. To understand why this is the case requires a bit of a detour.²

We begin with the term persistence and what students' use of that word implies. Persistence or its active form – persisting – is another way of speaking of motivation. It is the quality that allows someone to continue in pursuit of a goal even when challenges arise. A student has to want to persist to degree completion, that is to be motivated to persist, in order to expend considerable effort to do so. It follows that the question universities should ask is not only what they can do to retain their students but also what they can do to influence student's motivation to stay, persist, and complete their degrees. To answer that question, we must first ask what we know about the forces shaping student motivation that are within the university's ability to

^{1*} Presented at NASPA, March 12, 2024, Seattle, WA.

² Adapted from Tinto (2017a, 2017b)

influence. But rather than dive into a lengthy conversation of the ins and outs of student motivation theory, let me suggest that several deserve our attention, namely student self-efficacy, sense of belonging and perceived value of the curriculum (Tinto, 2017a).

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in their ability to succeed at a particular task or in a specific situation (Bandura, 1977). It is the outcome of the effect of past experiences on how individuals perceive themselves and their capacity to have some degree of control over their environment (locus of control). Self-efficacy is learned, not inherited. It is not generalizable in that it applies to all tasks and situations but can vary depending on the particular task or situation at hand. A person may feel capable of succeeding at one task but not another.

Self-efficacy influences how a person addresses goals, tasks, and challenges. A strong sense of self-efficacy promotes goal attainment while a weak sense undermines it. Whereas people with high self-efficacy will engage more readily in a task, expend more effort on it, and persist longer in its completion even when they encounter difficulties (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001), a person with low self-efficacy will tend to become discouraged and withdraw when encountering difficulties (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). As such, self-efficacy is the foundation upon which student success is built. Students have to believe they can succeed in their studies. Otherwise, there is little reason to continue to invest in efforts to do so.

The good news is that self-efficacy is not fixed. It is malleable. It can be influenced by student experience, especially during the critical first year of university study. The fact is that while many students begin university confident in their ability to succeed, more than a few do not. But even those who enter university confident in their ability to succeed can encounter challenges that serve to weaken their sense of self-efficacy. This is particularly true during the critical first year as students seek to adjust to the heightened demands of university study. In this regard, it is telling that student success in that year is not so much a reflection of students'

self-efficacy at the beginning of the first year as it is that they come to believe or continue to believe they can succeed and reach their goals as a result of their experiences during the year (Gore, Jr., 2006).

Therefore, while it is important that universities challenge existing labels as marking some entering students as less likely to succeed than others (Steele, 1997; Yeager & Walton, 2011), it is equally important that students are able to obtain the timely support they need when they encounter early difficulties in meeting the academic, and sometimes social, demands of university study. To be effective, support must be early before student struggles undermine their motivation to persist and be structured so as to enhance student uptake of support. To do so universities have adopted a range of early warning systems that identify students who are struggling in the first year and beyond. In some cases, these are based on first-year course performance. In others, they are the result of predictive analytic systems that monitor a range of student behaviors and course grades. Regardless of the form such systems take, institutions must be proactive in reaching out and supporting those students. Otherwise student uptake of support is often weak. This is the case because some students erroneously view help-seeking behavior as an admission that they are not cut out for university, others that they are the only students in class who are struggling, and still others who blame themselves for their struggles. To counter such feelings and improve uptake, it is important that universities make clear that academic struggles are the norm among first year students rather than the exception, and provide messages that show how students make use of support to succeed in university studies. But even when students seek out support they often do so too late in the semester to improve their grades. This is why it is far better that universities do not leave student access to support to chance. They should not only embed support in the curriculum and the courses that comprise the curriculum in the first year of university study, as they do in co-requisite instruction, but also monitor students' concerns about their academic performance.³

³ Co-requisite developmental education enrolls students in remedial and regular versions of the same subject at the same time. Students receive targeted support to help boost their understanding and learning of the regular subject material. The traditional pre-requisite model requires the remedial version to be completed before proceeding onto the regular version.

Sense of belonging

While believing one can succeed at university is essential for persistence to completion, it does not, in itself, ensure it. For that to occur, students have to become engaged and come to see themselves as a member of a community of other students, academics, and professional and administrative staff who value their membership – in other words, that they matter and belong. The result is the development of a sense of belonging. Although a sense of belonging may mirror students' experiences prior to entry that lead them to fear they do not belong in college, it is most directly shaped by the broader campus climate and students' daily interactions with other students, academics, staff and administrators, whether on-campus or on-line. It also may arise from peer-to-peer programs as described by Spes-Skrbis, Taib, and McFarlane (2017). It is in these and other situations that engagement with other people matters (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010). But it is not engagement per se that matters, though some engagement is better than none, as it is the students' perception of those engagements and the sense of belonging they derive from them (Hurtado & Carter, 1996, Strayhorn, 2012).⁴ Unfortunately, not all engagements positively impact students' sense of belonging.

The result of a sense of belonging is often expressed as a commitment that serves to bind the individual to the group or community even when challenges arise. Sense of belonging can refer to smaller communities within the institution as, for instance, with students with whom one shares a common interest (e.g. students in the same discipline or program) or background (e.g. students of similar socio-cultural backgrounds) or more broadly to the institution generally. Although the former can facilitate persistence, as it may help anchor the student to other students within the institution, it is the latter that is most directly related to student motivations to persist within the institution. This is the case because the former does not ensure the latter as a smaller community of students may see itself as an outcast from the larger institution. Nevertheless, students who perceive themselves as belonging to a specific group or the

⁴ This is but one reason why it is often difficult to interpret data from frequently used surveys of student engagement that employ only behavioral measures of engagement.

institution generally are more likely to persist because it leads not only to enhanced motivation but also a willingness to become involved with others in ways that further promote persistence. By contrast, a student's sense of not belonging, of being out of place, leads to a withdrawal from contact with others that further undermines motivation to persist. As importantly, feeling one does not belong in the classroom or program can lead to withdrawal from learning activities that undermine not only their motivation to persist but also their motivation to learn. Both undermine academic performance (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Here there is much universities can do. First, they can ensure, as best they can, that all students see the institution as welcoming and supportive - that the culture is one of inclusion. They can do so by not only speaking to issues of exclusion but also promoting those forms of activity that require shared academic and social experiences. In the academic realm, this can take the form of cohort programs in which students learn together over time. In the classroom, it can take the form of pedagogies like cooperative and problem or project-based learning that when properly implemented require students to become engaged and learn together as equal partners (Smallhorn, 2017). In the social realm, institutions can also take steps to provide for a diversity of social groups and organizations that allow all students to find at least one small community of students with whom they share a common bond. Regardless of how they promote engagement and students' sense of belonging, whether across campus, in academic programs, or in classrooms on-campus or on-line, institutions should do so at the very outset of students' journey as early as orientation if not before. As is the case for self-efficacy, becoming engaged and developing a sense of academic and social belonging early in the first-year facilitates other forms of social and academic engagement that enhance student learning in that year and persistence to completion in subsequent years. It follows that to improve persistence, institutions need to monitor students' perceptions of their experiences on campus and their sense of belonging and act accordingly when required.

The curriculum

Student motivation to persist is shaped as well by student perceptions of the value of what they are asked to learn. Though what constitutes value is subject to much debate, the underlying issue is clear. Students need to perceive the material to be learned is of sufficient quality and relevance to matters that concern them now and in their future to warrant their time and effort (Tessema, Ready & Yu, 2012; Kahu, Nelson & Picton, 2017). Only then will students be motivated to engage with that material in ways that promote learning and, in turn, persistence. Curriculum and teaching practices that are seen as irrelevant, unhelpful, or of low quality will often yield the opposite result (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004). This is especially true for students whose motivation is driven by the intrinsic rewards of university participation such as learning and personal growth. At the same time, student perceptions of the quality and relevance of the curriculum is also influenced by student learning style preferences and values. This is the case because the curriculum is not merely a collection of facts but also a set of values that influence not only which facts and concepts are presented in the curriculum but also the perspectives that are deemed appropriate to the analysis of those facts (Zepke, 2015).

Addressing this issue is challenging because student perceptions of the curriculum vary not only among different students but also among the differing subjects they are asked to learn. But there are steps institutions can and should take. First, institutions should see to it that students enrol in a field of study appropriate to their needs and interests, that they find the material within those courses sufficiently challenging to warrant their effort and, with academic support, reasonably within their reach to master. Second, they should ensure that the curriculum, in particular, but not only, in the social sciences and humanities, is inclusive of the experiences and histories of the students who are asked to study that curriculum. Third, institutions, specifically the teaching staff, should be explicit in demonstrating how the subjects that students are asked to learn can be applied to meaningful situations in ways that have relevance to issues that concern them. This is particularly important in first-year introductory courses as they serve as

gateways to courses that follow. Too often, meaningful connections in those courses are left for students to discover. Once again, it behooves the institution to monitor students' satisfaction with their studies and, if appropriate, intervene.

One way of making those connections is to use pedagogies, such as problem or project-based learning, that require students to apply the material they are learning to resolve concrete problems or to complete a project that frames the subject. Another is through contextualization where students are asked to learn material within the context of another field, as is the case in enabling education where skills are taught in the context of another area of study. In this and similar cases, students are more likely to want to learn basic skills because it helps them learn a subject in which they are interested. One promotes the learning of the other.

Implications for institutional action

Our discussion suggests at least two courses of action.

First, it points out the role of faculty in promoting not only student learning but also student sense of belonging. This is especially true in non-residential institutions that serve many students who work and/or have family obligations while attending college. For them, the classroom may be the only place on campus they meet other students and engage in learning activities. If they do not engage there, if they do not feel they belong there, it is unlikely they will engage elsewhere and develop a sense of belonging in the institution. This is but one reason why the faculty's effective use of cooperative, problem or project learning strategies is so important to student learning and persistence.

It follows that institutions have to build faculty development programs, especially for new faculty as well as those who teach the key first-year courses, that enable them to acquire the skills they need to construct classrooms that actively involve students in shared learning activities with other students. While it is true that faculty development programs are

common in higher education, most are voluntary and ill-focused.

Second, it tells us that institutions need to establish systems that monitor not only students engagements, but also their perceptions of their engagements. Their perceptions, not just their engagements, drive their responses to institutional action. Institutions also have to be aware of students' needs and concerns in ways that enable faculty and staff to respond to them in a timely manner when necessary. Left unaddressed, these can lead students to discontinue their studies. Monitoring of student needs and concerns must be continuous. Periodic surveys will not suffice.

Closing Thoughts

In closing, let me observe that the point of our discussion is not to argue for abandoning existing university efforts to retain their students or to suggest that the questions they pose about retaining students are misguided. Rather it is to promote another way of analyzing student success that recognizes, students' view of their experiences can differ from those of the university (Naylor (2017)). It argues that another question that universities - and by extension all its members, academics, professional staff, and administration - should ask themselves is: What can we do to lead students to want and have the ability to persist and complete their programs of study within the university? To do so, universities have to see the issue of persistence through the eyes of their students, hear their voices, engage with their students as partners, learn from their experiences and understand how those experiences shape their responses to university actions. Only then can universities further improve persistence and completion while also closing the continuing equity gaps that plague our societies.

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