



## DOCUMENT: TINTO

### **Student Success and the Construction of Inclusive Educational Communities**

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Interest in the issue of student success, in particular student retention, has not waned. If anything it has grown over the years. So much so that we have witnessed the growth of a new industry of retention firms, consultants, and retention-related products that offer the promise of a quick-fix to the "retention problem." Though there is no doubt some value to the work of these firms, the root of institutional success does not lie in their employment. Nor does it lie, as so many faculty believe, in retention programs per se or even in the dedicated staff that support those programs. Though their work is invaluable, their effort alone does not account for institutional success. Instead it resides in the work of the faculty and in the institution's capacity to construct educational communities that actively engage students in learning. It lies not in the retention of students but in their education. Successful education, not retention, is the secret of successful retention programs.

It is for this reason that I will argue that the success of institutional retention efforts ultimately resides in the institution's capacity to engage faculty and administrators across the campus in a collaborative effort to construct educational settings, classrooms and otherwise, that actively engage students in learning. As regards the retention of students of color, I will also argue that though we need concern ourselves with campus climates and support programs for those who are "at-risk", we must also concern ourselves with the character of the classrooms, laboratories and studios in which students find themselves. The educational communities we construct in those settings must be inclusive of all students, not just some.

To make clear why this is the case, we must first review what we have learned from many years of research on the roots of institutional and student success. Though programs on different campuses vary in their structure and in the specific sorts of actions they take on behalf of students, successful programs are invariably similar in a number of important ways, specifically in the way they think about retention, the sorts of emphasis they give their retention efforts, and the ends to which they direct their energies. These commonalities, or what I call the principles of effective retention, can be described as an enduring commitment to student welfare, a broader commitment to the education, not mere retention, of students, and an emphasis upon the construction of supportive social and educational communities that actively involve students in learning.

### **Institutional Commitment to Students**

One of the most evident features of effective retention programs is their enduring commitment to the students they serve. Rather than reflect only institutional interests, they continually ask of themselves how their actions serve to further the welfare of all students. Like healthy and caring

communities generally, effective retention programs direct their energies to helping students further their own needs and interests.

There is no programmatic substitute for this sort of commitment, no easy way to measure its occurrence. It is not the sole province of specific programs or of designated program staff but is the responsibility of all members of the institutions, faculty and staff alike. As such it is reflected in the daily activities of all program members and in the choices they make as to the goals to which they direct their energies. The presence of a strong commitment to students results in an identifiable ethos of caring which permeates the character of institutional life.

It is in this very important sense that institutions of higher education are like other human communities. The essential character of such communities lies not in their formal structures, but in the underlying values, which inspire their construction. The ability of an institution to retain students lies less in the formal programs they devise than in the underlying commitment toward students which direct their activities.

But it is a commitment that takes nurturing, one that is built upon incentives, rewards, and the investment of resources in the education of students. At the same time, it is a commitment on the part of all members of the institution, faculty, staff, and administrative, not just those few appointed staff whose job it is to focus on retention. Though the work of such dedicated staff is important, it alone is not sufficient to ensure the success of institutional retention efforts. In the long run, institutional success requires the collaborative effort of all members of the institution faculty, staff, and administrators alike.

### **Educational Commitment**

A second feature of effective institutions is that their commitment to students goes beyond the concern for retention per se to that of the education of students. The social and intellectual growth of students, not their mere retention, is the mark of effective retention efforts. Here I suggest lies the key to successful retention programs, namely that they focus not on the goal of retention but on the broader goal of student education.

Put in more direct language, effective retention programs do not take learning to chance. They are proactive in their search for student learning. They require of themselves, their faculty, staff and students that each engage in activities to heighten the likelihood that learning arises within the college. For that reason, successful institutions assess student skills, mandate placement in appropriate course settings, provide student development assistance, monitor student performance, and provide early, direct, and frequent feedback to students and staff, especially during the formative first year of college. Equally important, they concern themselves with the nature of the learning settings in which students find themselves and the skills faculty possess to educate the students they encounter in those settings. Lest we forget, the faculty in our colleges and universities are the only faculty from kindergarten through college who are not trained to teach their students.

### **Social and Intellectual Community**

A third feature of effective retention programs, indeed of institutions with high rates of student retention generally, is their emphasis upon the communal nature of institutional life and the

importance of educational community, social and academic, in the learning process. Successful institutions have come to understand that student-learning best occurs in settings that integrate students into their daily life and provide social and intellectual support for their individual efforts.

Effective programs reach out to make contact with students in order to establish personal bonds among students and between students, faculty, and staff members of the institution. In this manner effective retention programs not only provide continuing assistance to students, they also act to ensure the integration of all individuals as equal and competent members of the academic and social communities of the college.

It is for this reason that effective programs have focused much of their energies on constructing classroom settings and academic programs across classrooms that actively involve and support students in the learning process (e.g. collaborative and cooperative teaching). They see successful student participation in the community of the classroom as a vehicle both to individual learning and to membership in supportive college communities generally.

For all students, but certainly for those who are first-generation college students or who need developmental assistance, effective programs also understand that support for learning must come from many quarters, not only from the faculty who are the guardians of the classroom. It is for this reason that effective programs stress the importance of frequent and rewarding contact between faculty, staff, and students in a variety of settings both inside and outside the formal confines of the classrooms and laboratories of institutional life. The use of faculty and peer mentor programs, frequent informal meetings and activities all serve to heighten the degree and range of interaction among members of the community. The stress here is on the nature of student, faculty, and staff contact and its relationship to the student development. The research in this regard is quite clear, namely that the frequency and perceived worth of interaction with faculty, staff, and other students is one of the strongest predictors not only of student persistence but also of student learning.

The importance of a supportive community for student success is particularly apparent among students of color, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For students in largely white institutions, academic and social support is absolutely essential for their continued persistence and development as students. By contrast, the messages they frequently receive in and out of classrooms as to their marginality does much to explain their leaving. To repeat, the educational communities we construct must be inclusive communities in which all students, not just some are able to gain a valued voice in the construction of knowledge.

### **The Question of Choice:**

#### **Where Does One Invest Scarce Resources on Behalf of Student Retention?**

The practical question remains as to where and in what form should institutions invest scarce resources to enhance student retention? Here the evidence of effective programs is clear, namely that the practical route to successful retention lies in those programs that ensure, from the very outset of student contact with the institution, that entering students are integrated into the social and academic communities of the college and acquire the skills and knowledge needed to become successful learners in those communities.

### **Principles of Implementation**

Several important principles of implementation should be noted. First, institutions must recognize that frontloading of effort is the wisest course of action. The earlier one addresses the problem of student departure, the greater the likely returns to retention efforts. This is the case not only because the greatest proportion of leaving occurs in the first year, but also because over half of all student leavings have their roots in the first-year college experience. Efforts to reshape the freshman year experience invariably have the largest return in both retention and student learning.

Second, institutions must understand that there is no one retention program in which they should invest, no one type of program which provides the "cure" for student retention. Rather than reflect any one type of effort, successful institution retention programs are the result of the coordination across the campus of a variety of different types of programs, academic and social that seek, in differing ways, to integrate and support students and promote their becoming effective learners while in college.

Third, student learning should not be left to chance. Institutions must invest in forms of intrusive monitoring and assessment of student academic progress that enable them to intervene early rather than later, in the student career. They must be able to ascertain from the outset of the first semester whether additional assistance is required. And they must be able to ascertain within the classroom, when students are in further need of assistance. Most typically, this means that assessment must be carried out within classrooms by the faculty who teach first-year students and be structured so as to provide feedback to students on a continuing basis early in the first year.

Last, but by no means least, institutions should invest their energies to enhance the education of their students. Institutions should give serious attention to the character of student experiences both inside and outside the classroom and to the curricular and staff development resources needed to ensure that those experiences promote, rather than constrain, student learning. Quality teaching and involving classroom and co-curricular activity should be the norm, not the exception, of student experience.

### **Programs and Procedures**

Institutions have employed a wide array of programs to help students succeed. These range from pre-admission and orientation programs, early learning assessment and mandated academic assistance, mandatory first-year advising and counseling, intrusive monitoring and assessment of first-year student academic progress, freshman courses that provide new students with the knowledge and skills needed for satisfactory college performance, faculty and peer mentor programs, staff development programs that enable faculty to acquire the skills they need to become more effective teachers, to the development of learning communities that enable new students to share their learning experiences.

As regards early educational assessment, institutions should carefully assess the skills of their entering students and mandate, where necessary, placement in developmental education courses. Simply put, each entering student should be provided with the opportunity to acquire

the academic skills needed to prosper and learn while in college. Where possible, that assistance should be integrated with, rather than segregated from, ongoing freshman year courses. That is to say, it should be so organized as to enable students to make some progress toward degree completion during their first year of college. Colleges should avoid the situation where assistance is so structured so as to preclude any form of credit coursework during the first year. It is for that reason that many programs have employed summer bridge programs in order to ensure that no entering student begins the regular academic year so far behind other students that some degree of integration in the regular academic program is impossible. The same logic applies to the use of supplemental instruction which attaches learning assistance to ongoing academic programs and classes.

Colleges should also give serious consideration to the establishment of freshmen year academic programs which are tailored to the specific educational needs of new students. In some cases this may mean the use of summer bridge programs to enable students make up for pre-college learning deficits. In other cases, it may mean the restructuring of part or all of the freshmen year and the establishment of a freshmen year faculty and staff whose particular job it is to serve the educational needs of first-year students. However conceived, the essential point of first year programs is not simply that they focus on new students, but that they provide institutions with a way of effectively responding to student needs during the first year of college.

In this regard, institutions should explore making substantial changes in the types of educational experience most beginning student encounter in their first year of college. Rather than promoting educational experiences that emphasize passivity and solo performance, institutions should construct educational settings that encourage, indeed require, active involvement in their own learning and that of others. Specifically, I refer to the growing movement toward collaborative and cooperative learning in higher education and the development of learning communities for first-year students. If you have not yet done so, I urge you to move quickly to join that movement and give your students a meaningful voice in their own education. As we have discovered, in our studies of learning communities and collaborative learning for the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, gaining that voice and sharing it with others is a very powerful educational experience that enhances both learning and persistence. And it does so for all students, not just those typically labeled as "honor students."

Lest we forget, for most colleges and most students, the classroom is the primary place of contact between faculty and students. If students do not engage there, they do not, given their time and commitments, become engaged elsewhere. If they are uninvolved in the classroom they will very likely remain uninvolved in other aspects of their educational experience. It is for this reason that effective programs have focused much of their energies on constructing classroom settings and academic programs that actively involve students in the learning process and ensuring, as best they can, that both faculty and students enter those classrooms with the skills needed to make that process effective for all students.

This means, of course, that special attention must be paid to the teaching skills of faculty and their ability to assess, within the classroom, student learning. All faculty, but new faculty in particular, should be expected to participate in staff development programs that enable participants to acquire a range of pedagogical skills that can be brought to bear on the demanding task of teaching students from diverse backgrounds and cultures. And they should be

expected to assess for themselves their students' learning. In the final analysis, it is classroom level assessment that is most effective in altering the character of the teacher-student relationship and the learning that arises from it.

### **Concluding Observation**

I would like to conclude with a plea, specifically with a plea for us not to lose sight of the importance of citizenship in the education of our students. Let me do so by observing that one of the most important challenges facing us in the next decade concerns the character of the education we make available to future generations of college students. Here let me be quite clear. We have too long let the education of college students be dictated by the sometimes parochial and self-serving demands of work and career mobility and have all but ignored the importance of civic education. We have allowed, indeed often encouraged, our students to think first and foremost of what is in their own career interests and have been unwilling to have them confront the need to recognize that their interests and that of the larger community is inextricably intertwined. We have, to be blunt, failed in our obligation to concern ourselves with the development of future citizens as we have rushed headlong in the race to prepare our students to be workers in corporate America.

Yet the data are clear that other needs are more pressing. Our society is in great danger of breaking apart along racial and social class lines, of becoming a bipolar society of have and have-nots. Look about. Easily one in every four children born today are born into poverty. Over time nearly one in three will be on welfare at some point in their lives. A disproportionate number of these children will be of minority origins. At the same time, nearly half of all children, rich or poor, majority or minority, will live in single-parent, female headed households. The Bureau of Census, projects that less than forty percent of all children born in 1987, will live with both natural parents until age 18. The issue here is not one of the desirability of one type of family unit over another. There are many possible ways of constructing supportive family units. Rather it is an issue of the widespread erosion of supportive families of any sort.

If we are to have a future society of one, not two or more Americas, of one common caring community, not several divided along racial and economic lines, this must change. And we in higher education must respond accordingly. We must see to it that the education of our students is guided by the principle that its primary mission is to produce citizens, not just workers, who understand the need to concern themselves with the welfare of their fellow citizens as well as their own. You who understand this need must take the lead in this important effort. You cannot and must not be silent.

But the education of future citizens in higher education is not the result of lectures or of homilies directed at students. Higher education is already overrun with such expositions. Rather it arises from an intentional pedagogy in which students are required to engage in activities out of which the skills and norms of citizenship arise. It is for this reason, among others, that we must promote ever more forcibly collaborative and cooperative learning on your campuses. You must fight to ensure that collaborative learning is the hallmark of students' experience. As you well understand, asking students to become actively involved in their own learning and that of their peers engenders in students a deeper appreciation of the importance of community in their lives and the need to become responsible for one another. By giving students a valued voice in their

own learning, they come to understand the importance of allowing others to have a similar voice. In this way, the acquisition of educational citizenship in the classroom is a precursor to becoming a responsible citizen beyond the classroom.

In closing, let me point out that the view I have presented here is by no means a radical or a new one. Rather it is one which refers us back to some very important traditions of higher education, namely that it is at its core concerned with the fostering of communities of persons whose work it is to ensure the social and intellectual development of its members, in particular its student members. Seen in this fashion, the secret of successful retention programs for all students is no secret at all, but a reaffirmation of some of the important foundations of higher education. There is no great secret to successful retention programs, no mystery which requires unraveling. Though successful retention programming does require some skill and not an inconsiderable amount of effort, it does not require sophisticated machinery. It is within the reach of all institutions if they only give serious attention to the character of their educational mission and the obligation it entails. It is here that I conclude my comments, with the notion that successful retention is no more than, but certainly no less than, successful education.

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