

Reflections on retention and persistence: Institutional actions on behalf of student persistence¹

Respondent

Vincent Tinto, Syracuse University, New York City, United States of America

Studies in LEID is an international journal of scholarship and research in education. It supports emerging scholars and development of evidence-based practice. ISSN 1832-2050
© Copyright of articles is retained by the author. As an open access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings.

Introduction

Citing Jardine (forthcoming), Krause correctly points out the difference between the terms ‘retention’ and ‘persistence’. Whereas the former is typically used in reference to the actions and responsibilities of the institution, the latter focuses on the actions of the student and, as Lawrence reminds us, requires us to take on the perspective of the student as she/he seeks to persist within the institution. Retention as a goal reflects the interests of the institution, while persistence mirrors the desires of the student. As Simpson details, increasing retention has substantial immediate economic benefits for the institution, if not the society generally, and persistence, if it leads to completion, substantial immediate and long-term benefits for the individual.

But while discourses about the nature of retention and persistence and the actions that institutions and individuals should take on behalf of retention and persistence continue to be largely separate from each other, it is necessarily the case that the two forms of behaviour intersect. This is the case because increasing retention at the level of the institution necessarily involves increasing persistence among students. Unfortunately few efforts have been made to join the two.² Here I attempt to join the conversation started here by Lawrence’s discussion of the intersection of institutional culture and student progression by laying out the broad outlines of a model of institutional action that draws upon research into student persistence.

Institutional conditions for student persistence and success

The beginning point for this conversation is the recognition that individuals persist or do not persist within the institution and the consequent importance of the conditions that that institution establishes, conditions that enhance or constrain individual student actions. Though it is true that some individuals will persist even

¹ The discussion here is a continuation of an earlier article by the same author (Tinto, 2005)

² Others, including this author, have already carried out work that relates to institutional action (e.g., Astin, 1975; Beal & Noel, 1980; Berger, 2001; Braxton, 2001; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Clewell & Ficklen, 1986; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Tinto, 1993, 2005).

in the most challenging of institutional conditions, the ability of an institution to increase its rate of retention results from its capacity to construct conditions within the institution that promote persistence among individuals. This is not to deny that individual agency and attributes do not matter. Of course they do. In some cases they matter greatly. We all know of stories of students who by sheer drive of personality and motivation succeed against what are for most students seemingly insurmountable barriers. Rather it is to argue that for most institutions those attributes are largely fixed at entry and cannot be easily changed by institutional action. Institutional conditions in which students are placed, by contrast, can be changed, as they are already an outcome of past institutional decisions.³

What are these conditions? What does research on student persistence and success tell us about the conditions within institutions in which students are more likely to persist?⁴ The research points to five conditions, namely institutional commitment, institutional expectations, support, feedback and involvement.

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. Just as importantly, institutional commitment to students and to their success helps to generate commitment among students to the institutions. That commitment, in turn, is associated with student persistence (Tinto, 1993).

Expectations

Second, expectations, specifically high expectations on the part of the institution, are a condition for student success. Simply stated, no student rises to low expectations. Regrettably it is too often the case that institutions 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 our view that this is the case in part because we neither expect enough of them nor construct educational settings that require them to study enough.

At the same time, universities will sometimes hold differing expectations for differing students. This may be expressed in the labels that 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 that we treat differing students as sometimes happens among faculty and students of different gender or ethnicity.

³ This is the case because it is too easy to see the absence of student success as solely the responsibility of students. Too often we tend to ‘blame the victim’ and avoid seeing our own actions as being at least partially responsible for the problems that we face.

⁴ Here the term ‘research’ must be understood more broadly as accumulated knowledge that includes research, institutional studies and shared experience of many practitioners. Such ‘research’ is often more reliable than the research cited in some of the chapters in this volume because it involves the accumulation of evidence from differing sources and methodologies of knowledge making.

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 Solarzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) were referring to in their study of microaggressions. In this regard, Hurtado and Carter's (1996) study of students of colour on a predominantly white campus demonstrates how the institutional climate that results from multiple interactions between students and other members of the institution and the expectations that frame those interactions come to shape student perceptions of the degree to which the climate is hostile or friendly to their presence on campus and in turn their willingness to persist.

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 or 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).

Advising 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.⁵ 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 rigours 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 counselling, mentoring and ethnic student centres. Such centres 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 (e.g., Attinasi, 1989). For new students, these centres can serve as secure, knowable ports of entry that enable students to navigate safely the unfamiliar terrain of the university (London, 1989; Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994).

As regards academic support, research has demonstrated that it is most effective when it is connected to, not isolated from, the learning environment in which students are asked to learn. This is the case because the 'contextualisation' of academic support enables the student to utilise more easily the assistance provided in support activities to fulfil the immediate needs of doing well within the context in which the student is asked to learn. Supplemental instruction, for instance,

⁵ It is estimated that among four-year college students nearly two thirds either begin undecided or change their majors at least once during college.

provides academic support that is directly attached to a specific class in order to help students succeed in that class (Martin, Arendale, & Associates, 1992). 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. One of its virtues is that, as a result of working directly with the faculty who teach specific courses, such academic support seeks to address the tension between centralised and decentralised support services that Peach points out in her discussion of student support services.

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 with 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. Not to be confused with testing, these techniques articulate with forms of assessment, such as the well-known ‘one minute’ paper, that provide both students and faculty with information about what is or is not being learnt 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. But, as demonstrated by Strahm and Danaher in this issue, even the use of survey questionnaires as a form of assessment and feedback can promote increased student persistence.

Involvement

Fifth, and finally, involvement, or what has been frequently been described as academic and social integration, is a condition for student success (e.g., Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). The more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely they are to persist and graduate. This is especially true during the first year of study when, as Krause points out, 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 (Tinto, 2001).

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, lest 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 that 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). As Ferguson and Grainger demonstrate, this is the case even for a subject as seemingly esoteric as the learning of a foreign language.

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 & Harpel, 1982; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). It is for this reason that so much of the literature on institutional retention, learning and development speaks of the importance of building educational communities that involve all, not just some, students (Tinto, 1993). And this, as Gallie’s article

reveals, applies as well to distance education courses as it does to those held on campus.

It is not surprising, therefore, that so much of current efforts to promote student persistence focus on pedagogies of engagement, such as cooperative and/or collaborative learning, problem-based learning and learning communities, that require students to be actively engaged in learning with other students in the classroom.

Cooperative learning and collaborative learning though somewhat different (see Bruffee, 1995) each requires students to become actively involved in learning groups with other students so that the work of the group cannot be accomplished without each member doing his or her part (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Garth, 1999; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991, 1998a, 1998b). Problem-based learning is like cooperative learning, in that it utilises cooperative, small groups. But it does so to solve problems that frame the curriculum (Allen, Duch, & Groh, 1996; Duch, 1995; Wilkerson & Gijsselaers, 1996). Though they are often used in smaller classrooms, a number of large universities have successfully employed both methods in large classes (e.g., Ebert-May, Brewer, & Allred, 1997; Smith, 2000).

Research into the effectiveness of cooperative and collaborative learning and problem-based learning in improving student learning is widespread (Blumberg, 2000; Cooper & Robinson, 1995; Springer, Stanne, & Donovan, 1999; Wilkerson & Gijsselaers, 1996). Of particular note is that pedagogies of engagement substantially enhance student processing skills—relative to lecture classes—while not diminishing content acquisition (Ebert-May, Brewer, & Allred, 1997). Not surprisingly, they also enhance student involvement and persistence, in part because of the way that cooperative activities promote social involvement (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000).

Learning communities build upon the use of cooperative or collaborative pedagogy, by requiring students to register for two or more courses, forming a sort of study team. In a few cases, this may mean sharing the entire first semester curriculum (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gablenick, 2004), so that all new students in that learning community are studying the same material. Sometimes it will link all freshmen by tying two courses together for all, most typically a course in writing with a course in selected literature, biographies or current social problems. In the larger universities such as the University of Oregon and the University of Washington, students in a learning community may attend lectures with 200–300 other students but stay together for a smaller discussion section (Freshman Interest Group), led by a graduate student or upperclassman. In Seattle Central Community College, however, students in the Coordinated Studies Program take all their courses together in one block of time so that the community meets two or three times a week for four to six hours at a time.

To be effective, learning communities call for more than simple co-registration. Though co-registration helps—as it facilitates the development of socially supportive peer groups (Tinto & Goodsell, 1994)—it is not sufficient to ensure student success. Learning communities require a central theme or problem that links the courses in which the students co-register. The point of doing so is to construct an interdisciplinary learning environment in which students are able to connect what they are learning in one course to what they are learning in another. Together with the use of pedagogies of engagement, students share not only a common body of knowledge but also the experience of learning that knowledge together. The result is not only increased engagement (Zhao & Kuh, 2004) but also

increased learning and persistence (Johnson, 2000; Taylor, Moore, MacGregor, & Lindblad, 2004; Tinto, 1997, 1998; Tinto, Russo & Kadel, 1994).

When developed for the needs of new students, learning communities frequently include a freshman seminar as one of the linked courses (Baker & Pomerantz, 2001). When applied to the needs of academically under-prepared students, they frequently connect a study skills course to other courses in which the students are also registered and/or a developmental level course, such as writing, to a content course such as history so that the writing skills being acquired in the developmental course can be directly applied to a credit bearing course in history (Malnarich, Sloan, van Slyck, Dusenberry & Swinton, 2004; Tinto, 1999). By connecting courses that offer support, whether for new or academically under-prepared students, learning communities provide support that is connected to the daily learning needs of students and thereby facilitate the utilisation of support for success in the course to which the support is connected (Tinto, 1999).

Concluding thoughts

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 and social support, give frequent feedback and actively involve them, especially with other students and faculty, in learning. The key concept is that of educational community and the capacity of institutions to establish educational communities that academically and socially involve all students as equal members of the institution. Within those settings, students become involved with others in learning and engage in shared activities that promote student effort and the acquisition of skills, knowledge and the development of self-agency that in turn promotes persistence. Retention and persistence are interwoven. Institutional actions on behalf of the former promote student behaviours that engender the latter.

References

- Allen, D., Duch, B., & Groh, S. (1996). The power of problem-based learning in teaching introductory science courses. In L. Wilkerson & W. Gijsselaers (Eds.), *Bringing problem-based learning to higher education: Theory and practice (New directions for teaching and learning no. 68)* (pp. 43–52). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Angelo, T., & Cross, P. (1993). *Classroom assessment: A handbook for college teachers* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. (1975). *Preventing students from dropping out*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Attinasi, L. C. Jr. (1989). Getting in: Mexican Americans' perceptions of university attendance and implications for freshman year persistence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 60, 247–277.
- Baker, S., & Pomerantz, N. (2001). Impact of learning communities on retention at a metropolitan university. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 2, 115-126.
- Beal, P. E., & Noel, L. (1980). *What works in student retention?* Iowa City, IA: American College Testing Program and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.

- Berger, J. B. (2001). Understanding the organizational nature of student persistence: Recommendations for practice. *Journal of College Student Retention, 3*, 1.
- Blumberg, B. (2000). Evaluating the evidence that problem-based learners are self-directed learners: A review of the literature. In D. Evensen & C. Hmelo (Eds.), *Problem-based learning: A research perspective on learning interactions* (pp. 199–226). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bonwell, C., & Eison, J. (1991). *Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom (ASHE-ERIC Higher education report no. 1)*. Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Higher Education.
- Braxton, J. (Ed.) (2001). *Using theory and research to improve college student retention*. Special issue of *College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Company.
- Braxton, J., Hirschy, A., & McClendon, S. (2004). *Understanding and reducing college student departure. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, 30*(3).
- Braxton, J., Milem, J., & Sullivan, A. (2000). The influence of active learning on the college student departure process. *The Journal of Higher Education, 71*, 569–590.
- Bruffee, K. (1995). Sharing our toys: Cooperative versus collaborative learning. *Change, 27*, 12–18.
- Clewell, B., & Ficklen, M. (1986). *Improving minority retention in higher education: A search for effective institutional practices*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- Cooper, J., & Robinson, P. (1995). *An annotated bibliography of cooperative learning in higher education, Part III: The 1990s*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.
- Duch, B. (1995). Problem-based learning in physics: The power of students teaching students. *About Teaching, 47*, 47.
- Ebert-May, D., Brewer, C., & Allred, S. (1997). Innovations in large lectures: Teaching for active learning. *BioScience, 47*, 601–607.
- Endo, J., & Harpel, R. (1982). The effect of student-faculty interaction on students' educational outcomes. *Research in Higher Education, 16*, 115–135.
- Garth, R. (1999). Group-based learning. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 80*, 55–60.
- Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1996). Latino students' sense of belonging in the college community: Rethinking the concept of integration on campus. In F. K. Stage, G. L. Anaya, J. P. Bean, D. Hossler & G. D. Kuh (Eds.), *College students: Evolving nature of research* (pp. 123–136). Needham Heights, MA: Simon & Schuster Custom Publishing.
- Jardine, A. (forthcoming). How student services can influence the factors that relate to student persistence. *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*.
- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (1991). *Cooperative learning: Increasing college faculty instructional productivity (ASHE-ERIC Higher education report no. 91)*. Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Higher Education.
- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (1998a). *Active learning: Cooperation in the college classroom* (2nd ed.). Edina, MN: Interaction Books.
- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (1998b). Cooperative learning returns to college: What evidence is there that it works? *Change, 30*, 27–35.
- Johnson, J. (2000). Learning communities and special efforts in the retention of university students: What works, what doesn't, and is the return worth the investment? *Journal of College Student Retention, 2*, 219–238.

- Kuh, G. D. (2003). What we're learning about student engagement from NSSE. *Change*, 35, 24–32.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E. J., & Associates (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- London, H. (1989). Breaking away: A study of first generation college students and their families. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 97, 144–70.
- Lundberg, C., & Schreiner, L. (2004). Quality and frequency of faculty-student interaction as predictors of learning: An analysis by student race/ethnicity. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45, 549–565.
- Malnarich, G., Sloan, B., van Slyck, P., Dusenberry, P., & Swinton, J. (2004). *The pedagogy of possibilities: Developmental education, college-level studies, and learning communities*. Olympia, WA: Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, Evergreen State College.
- Martin, D., Arendale, D., & Associates (1992). *Supplemental instruction: Improving first-year student success in high-risk courses*. Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the First Year Experience.
- Smith, B. L., MacGregor, J., Matthews, R., & Gabelnick, F. (2004). *Learning communities: Reforming undergraduate education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Smith, K. (2000). Going deeper: Formal small-group learning in large classes. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 81, 25–46.
- Solorzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 69, 60–73.
- Springer, L., Stanne, M., & Donovan, S. (1999). Effects of small-group learning on undergraduates in science, mathematics, engineering, and technology: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 69, 50–80.
- Taylor, K., Moore, W., MacGregor, J., & Lindblad, J. (2004). *Learning community research and assessment: What we know now* (Learning communities monograph series). Olympia, WA: Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education. Evergreen State College.
- Terenzini, P. T., Rendon, L. I., Upcraft, M. L., Millar, S. B., Allison, K. W., Gregg, P. L., & Jalomo, R. (1994). The transition to college: Diverse students, diverse stories. *Research in Higher Education*, 35(1), 57–73.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropouts from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45, 89–125.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (1st ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd. ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (1997). Colleges as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 68, 599–623.
- Tinto, V. (1998). College as communities: Taking the research on student persistence seriously. *Review of Higher Education*, 21, 167–178.
- Tinto, V. (1999). Adapting learning communities to the needs of development education students. Paper presented at the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, Stanford University, Stanford, CA.
- Tinto, V. (2001). *Rethinking the first year of college* (Higher education monograph series). New York: Syracuse University.
- Tinto, V. (2005). Epilogue: Moving from theory to action. In A. Seidman (Ed.), *College student retention: Formula for student success* (pp. 317–334). Westport, CT: ACE/Praeger.

- Tinto, V., & Goodsell, A. (1994). Freshman interest groups and the first year experience: Constructing student communities in a large university. *Journal of the Freshman Year Experience*, 6, 7–28.
- Tinto, V., Russo, P., & Kadel, S. (1994). Constructing educational communities: Increasing retention in challenging circumstances. *Community College Journal*, 64, 26–30.
- Wilkerson, L., & W. Gijsselaers (Eds.) (1996). *Bringing problem-based learning to higher education: Theory and practice (New directions for teaching and learning no. 68)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Zhao, C., & Kuh, G. D. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 45, 115–138.