Through the Eyes of Students: Looking at Retention Through a Different Lens*

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For years our prevailing view of student retention has been shaped by theories that view student retention through the lens of institutional action that ask what institutions can do to retain their students. But when viewed through the eyes of students, it is evident that students do not seek to be retained. Rather they seek to persist. The two perspectives, although necessarily related, are not the same. They reflect different interests. While the institution's interest is to decrease withdrawal and increase the proportion of their students who graduate from the institution, the student's interest is to complete a degree often without regard to the institution in which it is earned.

When viewed from the students' perspective, persistence or its active form to be persist, is but one form of motivation. Students have to be persistent in their pursuit of their degrees and be willing to expend the effort to do so even when faced with challenges they sometimes encounter. Without motivation and the effort it engenders, persistence is unlikely -- institutional action aside. It follows that to promote greater degree completion institutions have to adopt the student perspective, see the institution through their eyes, and ask not only how they should act to retain their students but also how they should act so that more of their students want to persist to completion. The two questions, while necessarily linked, do not lead to the same sort of conversations about institutional action. The latter requires institutions to first understand how students perceive their experiences on campus and how their experiences on campus shape their motivation to persist. Only then can they ask what they can do to enhance student motivation to persist and complete their programs of study.

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The answer to that question is far from simple. Many experiences shape student motivation to persist not all of which are within the capacity of institutions to easily influence (e.g. events beyond the campus that pull students away from persistence). But of those that are, four stand out as being central to student motivation: student goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceived relevance of the curriculum.

Student Goals

Though it is evident that having the goal of completing college is necessary condition for completion, it is not a sufficient condition. This is the case not only because events during university study can influence students' motivation, but also because the goal itself may vary in character, intensity and clarity. Some students may intend only to earn enough hours to qualify for occupational advancement. They will leave once they acquire those hours regardless of their experience. Others may not intend to complete their degree at the institution in which they first enroll but hope to transfer to another institution to earn their degree. Still other students may not intend at the outset to transfer but do not place great importance on completing their degree in the institution in which they first enroll. They may be committed to the goal of completion, but only weakly committed to do so or to do so in their institution of initial enrollment. Conversely, others students may enroll in a particular institution because their goal is to obtain their degree from that institution. It is their "first choice." Other things being equal, such students are typically more likely to complete their degrees in their initial institution.

Students may also differ in their motivations for attending university. Some may be only weakly committed to the goal of completion. Even the smallest of events can sway their desire to persist. For others, the goal of college completion may be essential for the achievement of a larger goal typically associated with gaining entry to a particular occupation such as medicine or law.

Some students may be more concerned with the intrinsic benefits of university study (e.g. learning, affiliation, development, autonomy), while others more concerned with the perceived extrinsic benefits of university study (e.g. income, occupation, further education).

But not all students are clear in their reasons for attending college. Most often they are undecided about want they want to study. Their lack of clarity can undermine completion of only because it leads them to question why they should expend time and effort, and sometimes considerable resources, on a goal whose purpose is unclear. In the United States, for instance, it is estimated that nearly half of all beginning students are in varying degrees undecided about their program of study. Even then, some who initially select a major will change their major one or more times before earning their degree. That is they will become uncertain sometime during the stay at an institution.

Little surprise then that institutions in the United States and many other countries invest considerable resources in helping students select a field of study during the critical first year of college when student motivations are most malleable. In addition to advising generally, often by professionally trained advisors, institutions will provide career counseling services that help students not only learn about possible fields of study but also acquire the decision-making skills (e.g. self-knowledge) they need to make reasonable choices of major. In many cases, students are asked to complete occupational interest inventories to determine their interests and in turn identify possible areas of study appropriate to their interests. Increasingly these are completed on web-based systems that not only help students select a program of study but also allow them to select their courses to meet program requirements.

A somewhat different approach to advising and career counseling has been the development of what are referred to as “meta majors.” In this case, students are not required to select a specific program of study when they begin their studies but are asked instead to identify a broad field of study in which they are interested such as engineering or science. In response institutions construct a first semester or, in some cases, a first-year curriculum designed to help students identify a specific program within their field of interest. Early results of such efforts

suggest greater student satisfaction with their choice of major, reduced changing of major in the following years, and in turn greater rates of complete.

Differences in the character, intensity and clarity of student goals matter because students with different goals and motivations for going to university are likely to be differentially affected by their experiences in their studies. It is to these experiences that we now turn. In doing so, we make the assumption that students begin college with at least some degree to commitment to complete their degree in the institution in which they first enroll and ask what experiences influence their self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceptions of the relevance or worth of their studies and in turn their motivation to persist.

Student 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, 1994). It is one manifestation of how past experiences shape how individuals come to 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 fixed. It can and often does change during college. 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 in turn 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). Conversely a person with low self-efficacy will tend to become discouraged and withdraw when encountering difficulties (Vuont, Brown-Welty & Tracz, 2010). As such, self-efficacy is the foundation which student success in university is built. Students have to believe or come to believe they can succeed in their studies. Otherwise, there is little reason to continue to invest in efforts to do so.

A strong sense of self-efficacy cannot be assumed. Although many students begin university confident in their ability to succeed, more than a few do not, in particular those whose past experiences lead them to question their ability to succeed in the university, that they are not university material, as well as those who experience stereotype threats that label them as less likely to succeed (Steele, 1997). But even those who enter university confident in their ability to succeed can encounter challenges that serve to weaken their sense of self-efficacy. That is particularly true during the crucial first year as students seek to adjust to the heightened demands of university study. What matters for success in that year, however, is not so much that students enter believing in their capacity to succeed as it is that they come to believe they can as the result their early experiences (Gore, 2006).

Therefore while it is important that universities challenge existing labels as marking some students as less likely to succeed than others and provide appropriate role models whose experience demonstrates that success is attainable, it is equally important that students are able to obtain the timely support they need to succeed when they encounter early difficulties in meeting the academic demands of university study. The reasons for academic struggles are varied. Students may underestimate the amount of study time needed to pass classes and have difficulty balancing their schoolwork with everyday outside obligations like work, family, and friendships. While many universities offer support services like on-campus tutoring or study counseling, these services are often plagued by low uptake and visibility. Some students who are struggling or experience early failure erroneously view help-seeking behavior as an admission that they are not “cut out” for university, that they are the only students in class who are struggling, and still others seek support out too late in the semester to turn their grades around. To counter such feelings it is important for universities to make clear that academic struggles are the norm, not the exception, among first-year students and provide messages that show not only how successful students access support but also how they manage their time to deal with the multiple demands of institutional life.[i]

To be effective support must be early before student struggles undermine student motivation to persist and be structured so as to enhance student uptake of support. Institutions need to know which students need support and when they do earlier enough to make a difference. Midterm grades will not do. To do so, institutions have employed early warning systems that, when properly implemented, alert faculty and staff to early student struggles and trigger support when needed. These frequently depend on web-based applications that rely either on faculty input or more recently on the results of predictive analytic systems that employ student attributes together with classroom performance measures to gauge student struggles.

It should be pointed out that students' belief in their ability to succeed is not just an academic issue. It can also reflect their perception of their ability to manage the larger task of going to college while trying to manage other responsibilities. This is but one reason why first-generation and low-income university students and those with responsibilities beyond the campus (e.g., working students and those with families) are, on average, less likely to complete than full-time, non-first-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Sense of Belonging

While believing one can succeed in the university is essential for persistence to completion, it does not in itself ensure it. For that to occur students have to come to see themselves as a member of a community of other students, faculty and staff who value their membership -- that they matter and belong. Although a sense of belonging can mirror students' prior experiences before entry that lead them to fear they do not belong, it is most directly shaped by the broader campus climate and students' daily interactions with other students, faculty, staff and administrators on campus. It is here that engagement with other people on the campus matters (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010). But it is not engagement per se that matters, though some engagement is better than none, as it is students' perception of those engagements, academic and social, and the meaning they derive from them as to their belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1996, Strayhorn, 2012). Thus the term "sense of belonging."

The result 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 or background (e.g. students of similar ethnic backgrounds) or more broadly to the institution generally. Although the former can facilitate persistence, as it may help anchor the student to other students on campus, 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. In both cases, it is the case that students who perceive themselves as belonging 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 undermine motivation to persist (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Sense of belonging is not merely one of social membership. It also reflects students' experiences in the academic realm of the university, in particular in the classrooms and laboratories of the university, and the sense of belonging that arises from those experiences. Feeling one does not belong in the classroom and the activities of the classroom or that one's voice in the classroom is not seen as being of value often leads to withdrawal from learning activities that undermines that only motivation to persist but also academic performance (Nora, Urick & Quijada Cerecer, 2011; Rendon, 1994; Rendon & Muñoz, 2011). While such feelings can reflect students' perception of the learning environment (Lizzio, Wilson & Simons, 2002), it is most directly shaped by the meanings they derive from their engagement in learning activities within the classroom. For students who commute to college, especially those whose time on campus is limited by external obligations such as work and family, the classroom becomes the primary, if not only, place on campus where sense of belonging is shaped (Fernandes, Ford, Rayner & Pretorius, 2017).

Here there is much universities can do. First, they must ensure 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 by promoting those forms of activity that require shared academic and social experiences. In the academic realm, that can take the form of cohort programs and learning communities. Within classrooms, it can mean using pedagogies like cooperative and problem-based learning that when properly implemented require students to learn together as equal partners. In the social realm, institutions can take steps to provide for a diversity of social groups and organizations that allow all students to find at least one smaller community of students with whom they share a common bond. However they promote students' sense of belonging, institutions should address it at the very outset of students' journey -- indeed as early as orientation (Yeager & Walton, 2011). As is the case for self-efficacy, developing a sense of academic and social belonging during the first year facilitates other forms of engagement that enhance not only completion, but also, and perhaps more importantly, student learning.

Perceptions of the Curriculum

Student motivation to persist is also shaped by their perception of the value of what they are being 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 to warrant their time and effort; that the material is worth knowing (Frick, Chadha, Watson, Wang, & Green, 2009; Tessema, Ready, & Yu, 2012). Only then will they be motivated to engage that material in ways that promote learning and, in turn, persistence. Curriculum that is seen as irrelevant or of low quality will often yield the opposite result (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004).

Perceptions of the quality and relevance of the curriculum reflect a complex interplay among a variety of issues including faculty teaching methods, perceived institutional quality, and 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 if only because student perceptions of the curriculum vary not only among different students but also the differing subjects they are asked to learn. But there are steps institutions can and should take. First, institutions should, as noted earlier, see to it that students enroll in a field of study appropriate to their needs and interests, 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 faculty, 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.

One way of making those connections is to use pedagogies, such as problem and 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 class. Another is through contextualization where students are asked to learn material within the context of another related field of study. For instance, a methods course with one on an applied field that requires the use of those methods. In this and other cases, students are more likely to want to learn the material in the methods course because it helps become competent in the applied field in which they are interested. One promotes the learning of the other. A more direct way of demonstrating relevance is through structured internships in the field or occupation in which the student is enrolled. In this case, it is important that the person supervising the internship make explicit,

through words and action, the ways in which what they are studying is relevant to that field or occupation. It is also possible to have alumni of the program in which the student is enrolled serve as a mentor to students in the program. Their experiences will give “living” proof of how their courses are relevant.

Closing Thoughts:

It bears repeating that student motivation is the foundation upon which persistence and completion are built. Simply put, students who want to persist are more likely to do so even when challenges arise. Student motivation is, in turn, shaped by student goals and their perception of their ability to succeed in their studies, their belonging and the relevance of their studies. Those perceptions arise from student experiences with others on campus and the meanings they derive from those experiences. To understand how they impact motivation, colleges need to see student experience through their eyes, hear their voices, and take seriously their voices and do so in ways that help shape institutional policy and practice.

But motivation alone, though necessary, is not sufficient to ensure persistence. This is the case because more than a few students leave because external factors, such as family and work, pull them away from persistence, while others require support, academic and sometimes social, to continue in their program. Therefore, while colleges should act in ways to promote student motivation, they should also provide the support students may need to persist. This is especially true at the very beginning of students’ journey through college when perceptions are being formed and adjustments to the demands of college study are being made. As an observer of higher education once observed, “the best time to begin promoting persistence is at the beginning.”

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[i] Instead of waiting for the student to access academic support, some institutions, such as the community and technical colleges in the state of Washington, have embedded academic support in key classrooms. In some cases an academic support person will co-teach with the class instructor. In other cases, the academic support person will work with the instructor outside class to help her learn how to embed academic support in their instruction. In either case, the result is very much the same; namely that all students in the class obtain support without have to access it outside the classroom.