



Moving from Retention to Persistence: A Student Perspective

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Moving from Retention to Persistence: A Student Perspective*

For years our prevailing view of student retention has been shaped by theories that view student retention through the lens of institutional action and ask what institutions can do to retain their students. Students, however, do not seek to be retained. 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 university in which it is earned.

When viewed from the students' perspective, persistence 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 and completion is unlikely – university action aside.

It follows that to promote greater degree completion universities have to adopt the student perspective 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 and obtain the support they need to do so. 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, how past experiences prior to university influence those perceptions, and how their experiences on campus shape their motivation to persist. Only then can they then ask what they can do to enhance student motivation to persist and complete their programs of study.

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The answer to the latter 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, student self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceived value of the curriculum.

Student Goals

Though it is evident that having the goal of completing university 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 both character and intensity. Not all students intend to complete their degree at the institution in which they first enroll but plan to transfer to another institution to do so. Other students may not intend 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 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 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 university. Their lack of clarity can undermine completion (Diesche, 2009). Others may be only weakly committed to the goal of completion. Even the smallest of events can sway their desire to persist.

At the same time, while students may be clear about their goal for attending university, they are not always clear about what they want to study at the university. In the United States, at least, it is estimated that nearly half of all

beginning students are in varying degrees undecided about their program of study. This is but one reason why advising during the first year, if not before, is so important to student success. Universities have responded with a range of advising strategies from relying on individual faculty to advise students, employing professionally trained advisors to do so, to some combination of faculty and professional staff. In many cases students are asked to complete lengthy questionnaires to determine their interests and in turn identify possible areas of study. 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 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 student when they begin the university but are asked instead to identify a broad field of study in which they are interested such as engineering or science. In response they are provided a set of first-year courses and/or a mode of advising designed to help them identify a specific program within their field of interest. Early results suggest greater student satisfaction with their choice of major and reduced changing of major in the following years.

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 (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall & Abel, 2013). It is to these experiences that we now turn. In doing so, we make the assumption that students begin university 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 value 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 malleable, not fixed. 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 (Vuong, Brown-Welty & Tracz, 2010). As such, self-efficacy is the foundation which student success in university 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.

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. This 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 (Yeager & Walton, 2011), 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 systems like on-campus tutoring, these services are often plagued by low uptake and visibility. Some students 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 how students make use of support to succeed in university studies.

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. Midterm grades will not do. Universities need to know which students need support and when they do earlier enough to make a difference. To meet that need institutions have recently 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 university 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 (Pell Institute, 2015).

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 student's 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 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 often leads to withdrawal from learning activities that undermines that only motivation to persist but also academic performance. Such feelings reflect not only students' perception of the learning environment (Lizzio, Wilson & Simons, 2002) but also their engagement in learning activities within the classroom.

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. 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 student learning and completion.

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 warrant their time and effort (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, 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 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 field, as is the case in developmental education where basic 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.

Universities can also achieve contextualization through the use of learning communities. When properly implemented, students co-register in two or three courses that are linked through an issue, problem or project that provides a unifying theme to the community. Such multiple course linkages can provide not only academic and social support but also promote a form of interdisciplinary learning that is not easily achieved in standalone courses. Lest one forget, the goal of persistence is not simply that students complete their degrees, but that they learn in powerful ways while doing so. Education is the goal of our efforts; persistence is only a vehicle for its occurrence.

Closing Thoughts

It bears repeating that student motivations are shaped by their perceptions of their experiences and how they respond to those perceptions. Not all student responses lead to success. This is particularly evident among low-income students who have grown up in situations of limited resources. Living in a situation of scarcity not only influences a person's perception of their abilities (e.g. self-efficacy) but also how they respond to their experiences. Too often they do so in ways that undermine their success (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013). This matters because the impact of any institutional practice is shaped by those responses. It follows that a prerequisite for implementing practice in ways that improve student success is to understand how students perceive and in turn respond to those practices.

There is little doubt that many universities have improved student graduation. But they can and should do more. Universities must expand their conversation about improving completion beyond simply how they can retain their students to how they can act in ways that lead all students to want to stay and complete their degrees. Though it is undeniably the case that academic ability matters, student motivation is the key to student persistence and completion. But addressing student motivation requires universities to do more than simply issue another survey questionnaire. Rather it necessitates that they understand students' perceptions of their experience and how events throughout the campus influence their perceptions and shape, in turn, their motivation to persist. Universities need to listen to all their students, take seriously their voices, and be sensitive to how perceptions of their experiences vary among students of different races, income levels, and cultural backgrounds. Only then can they further improve persistence and completion while addressing the continuing inequality in student outcomes that threaten the very fabric of our societies.

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