

Retaining Students in Classes: Putting Theory into Everyday Practice

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Retention Theory:

Why Students Do Not Persist in Community College Courses

“Students who have frequent contact with faculty members in and out of class during their college years are more satisfied with their educational experiences, are less likely to drop out, and perceive themselves to have learned more than students who have less faculty contact.” (K. Patricia Cross, 1998)

Students do not begin a college course with the intention of dropping out before the end of the term, yet many do. Research shows that how students perceive their learning environment and other college experiences influences their willingness to persist. Understanding student retention theory and how it can be applied in the classroom can improve student retention by helping faculty make better decisions regarding planning and teaching their courses. In addition, increased knowledge about retention theory will help faculty improve their interactions with students both in and out of the classroom.

One of the most prominent student retention theorists is Vincent Tinto. Tinto’s theory, first published in 1975, focused on 4-year institutions, but his findings are also applicable to community colleges. According to Tinto, individuals possess attributes (such as family background, skills, abilities, and prior education) that influence their choices of goals and commitments. When these goals and commitments interact with college experiences in ways that don’t facilitate students becoming academically and socially connected, they are not likely to persist. Faculty must create learning opportunities that enable students to make those connections.

“To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.” (E. E. Cummings)

All students are members of one or more cultural groups. If students experience a college culture very different from their own, they will have difficulty becoming connected. This is the situation in which many minority and first-generation students find themselves when embarking on a college experience (Rendón, Jalomo and Nora, 1998). Students worry that in order to be successful in college they will have to abandon their group identity. They are also fearful that their educational experiences will change them so that they will no longer “fit in” with their families or friends. Instead of demanding that students renounce their previous relationships and cultural norms, faculty should assist students in making modifications in their relationships and enable them to become bicultural. Institutions and faculty must also help students make connections by providing people, experiences and objects in the college culture that have linkages with students’ earlier cultural upbringing. In addition, faculty must be able to recognize and make adjustments when their own expectations conflict with students’ cultural expectations.

First-generation college students need additional assistance in navigating the “college culture” and learning the rules of the “college game.” Statistics indicate that children are less likely to go to college if their parents did not complete a college degree. High school graduates whose parents did not go to college tend to report lower educational expectations than their peers as early as 8th grade. They are likely to be less prepared academically and receive less support from their families in preparing and planning for college. In addition, those children who do go to college are less successful once they get there (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Statistics also indicate that students from poor (in the lowest income quartile) African-American or Hispanic/Latino families are more likely to be first-generation students than their white counterparts. First-generation students are more likely to go to community colleges than attend four-year institutions.

Community college classes include students of different ages (Miller, 2001), life stages and historical generations. The same classroom may have students from the silent generation (born 1925-1942), boomers (1943-1960), gen-Xers (1961-1981), and millennials (1982-) (Millennials Rising Web site). The historical era in which students matured affects their beliefs, values, and assumptions (Dirkx, 2003). Age, generational and life-stage characteristics must be considered when faculty design learning activities so that all students will make academic and social connections.

“It is the people who come face-to-face with students on a regular basis who provide the positive growth experiences for students that enable them to identify their goals and talents and learn how to put them to use. The caring attitude of college personnel is viewed as the most potent retention force on a campus.”

(Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985, p. 17)

Researchers describe many reasons for leaving college as well as student characteristics of non-persisters. According to Tinto, academic reasons represent only 20-30% of all college leavers nationally. The remaining 70-80% of students who are not retained leave for the following reasons: (1993)

- **Adjustment.** Students who are inadequately prepared for the magnitude of academic and social change required of them become overwhelmed and drop out. This is particularly common among minority and first-generation students.
- **Goals.** It is not uncommon for students to change goals or majors while in college. Some students, however, have extreme difficulty determining what they want to pursue academically. If the indecision continues over a long period of time, students are likely to withdraw from college.
- **Commitment.** Students have experiences with the college both before (visits, application process, etc.) and after their entry. Experiences with the college after entry are more important to persistence and departure than what has gone on before entry.
- **Finances.** Many students, especially those from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds, withdraw because they are unable to bear the direct and indirect costs of college.
- **Integration and community membership.** When students are unable to become integrated into the college community, they are not likely to persist. As discussed above, this reason often applies to minorities and first-generation students who find the culture of the institution very different from their native cultures.
- **Incongruence.** A mismatch between student interests and needs and the institutional mission or course and program offerings can result in a student leaving.
- **Isolation.** When students don't interact with other members of the institution, particularly faculty, they will feel alone in the learning process and are more likely to drop out.

Tinto (1987) also stressed that external social systems may interact with the above reasons and further undermine a student's ability to persist in college. These external systems may involve friends who didn't go to college, parents who are anxious about their child changing in college, conflicts with work, family demands, and so on.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2003), Beal and Noel (1980), and other researchers described characteristics of community college students who are at risk of not earning a degree for one or more of the above reasons. These characteristics include:

- Delayed postsecondary enrollment
- Part-time enrollment
- Full-time or significant employment
- Low commitment (e.g., only in college because parents want them to be or being in college is better than working) and no real intention to persist
- Low ability or underprepared
- First-generation college student
- High school dropout or GED recipient
- Friends attend other schools
- Family problems
- Lack of encouragement from family and/or peers
- Having dependents other than spouse
- Single-parent status

- Emotional and/or personal problems including substance abuse
- Lack of institutional/student fit and involvement
- Absence of significant interaction with faculty and other members of the college community
- Transportation issues
- Financial independence and/or financial issues

The more intensely students are engaged and involved in their own education, the more likely they are to do well, be satisfied with their educational experience, and stay in school (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Alexander Astin defined involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (1984, p. 297). This energy is exhibited by the amount of time students spend studying, participating in campus activities, and interacting with faculty and other students. Students with work or family obligations, single parents, students who have been out of school for a significant amount of time, those who disliked high school or who had negative high-school experiences, students who weren’t involved in high school, and evening and weekend-only students find it difficult to get involved outside of the classroom. Many of these students perceive involvement as someone else taking an active role in assisting them rather than taking the initiative themselves (Rendon, 1994). Uninvolved students are unlikely to take advantage of campus services or activities unless there is active outreach and intervention. For many students, the college classroom may be the only place where involvement may arise. Students who interact with their teachers develop a support network and are more likely to persist in classes (Tinto, Russo, & Stephanie, 1994). In addition, faculty can intervene by taking an active interest and affirming students as being capable of doing academic work while at the same encouraging them to obtain assistance and become involved.

Faculty who teach developmental courses must make considerable effort in encouraging students to persist throughout their remedial work and assisting in the transition to college-level courses. Many studies have been done showing the relationship between remedial or developmental courses and retention. In particular, a study done at Michigan State University (1998) showed that students who take and complete developmental courses have greater retention rates than students who do not complete remedial programs. According to Weissman, Bulakowski, and Jumiski, developmental education should be required for all underprepared students on initial enrollment. In addition, they recommend that underprepared students be allowed to enroll in college-level courses as long as they are simultaneously working on remediation. The only exception is for students who are underprepared in reading and writing as well as students who are underprepared in reading, writing, and math. These students should be required to complete their developmental education program before beginning college-level courses (1997). Tinto (2002) argues that developmental education programs are not effective in keeping students in school unless the programs and courses are connected to the curriculum and particularly to the skills the student needs to be successful in that curriculum. He advocates the use of learning communities in which students can obtain academic support and make progress toward degree completion at the same time.

“Nine tenths of education is encouragement .” (Anatole France)

Community college faculty cannot control the characteristics of their students. However, they can control how they interact with students (Tinto, 2002). The most important things instructors can do to help students succeed is to set high expectations for student success, provide good academic and career advising, support and encourage students, and promote their active involvement in learning. If an instructor tells students that a class is really hard, and they probably won’t survive, then the instructor may be creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. If, on the other hand, an instructor creates an environment in which students believe that they can succeed, then students are more likely to persist and do well. Oftentimes what appears to be lack of motivation is really students’ family and work obligations, lack of self confidence, or not knowing how to study. Faculty must be supportive and flexible if they expect to retain students. The goal of teachers should not be to make it hard for students, but to make it possible. The remainder of this paper provides suggestions to faculty about how they can apply retention theory to their classes. These strategies and techniques can be used by any community college teacher to make students feel more connected, help them learn more, and increase the likelihood that they will persist.

Classroom Practice: Strategies for Improving Retention

“Our best experiences in teaching are those where we connect with our learners and are of genuine assistance to them.”

(Wlodkoski and Ginsberg, 1995, p. 1)

Most students decide whether to continue enrollment within the first 6-8 weeks of their first semester. What happens on the first day of class sets the learning climate for the entire semester and may help a student decide whether to stay or flee. On the first day you should:

- **Be enthusiastic.** If you act bored or lack passion for teaching or your subject matter, you will impart that attitude to your students. Why would students want to learn your subject in your class if you don't seem interested or interesting?
- **Begin building connections** with your students.

Introduce yourself. Tell students what you would like them to call you and how you can be reached outside of class. Tell them how you chose your field of study and your educational background. If you went to a community college, be sure to let them know that as well.

Learn about your students. Ask students to complete an information sheet listing name, address, phone number, e-mail address, major, work information, how many hours a week they work outside of class, why they are taking this class, what other courses they are taking, what grade they expect to earn, how much time they expect to study outside of class, strengths and weaknesses, previous related courses, etc. Respond to their information sheet by writing a short note to **each** student saying something positive as well as expressing concerns (e.g., “You're working a lot of hours and taking a lot of courses. I'm concerned that you may not be able to be as successful as you and I would like you to be” or “You indicated that you expect to spend 1 hour outside of class studying each week and expect to earn an A. Typically students who get A's report that they had to spend 8-10 hours a week outside of class time.”). This helps take advantage of the “teachable moment” as well as provides a way for you to begin a dialog with each student.

Learn student names as quickly as possible, and use them when addressing students in class (and out of class). The following suggestions may help you quickly learn names:

- Ask students to introduce themselves (a great way to take attendance without you worrying how to pronounce names!) and share something that will help you and the rest of the class learn their names. This can also be done as a paired-activity with students introducing each other.
- Take pictures and paste them on index cards. Use them as “flash cards” to help you learn names.
- Assign seats or use name tags. You can keep the tags and have students pick them up at the start of each class. They can be used for attendance purposes as well as to help you learn names.

Help students connect with classmates. Encourage students to have an in class buddy and have them exchange phone numbers and e-mail addresses.

- **Set a positive tone that focuses on student success.** When students see your syllabus and course requirements, they may feel overwhelmed. Be reassuring. Let students know that you believe they can succeed, and let them know you will help them. The purpose of the first class session should set up an expectation for success—not scare students away!
- **Involve students** and encourage participation in first-day activities so that they become active learners early in the course.
- **Don't just read the syllabus.** Students find that as uninteresting as faculty do! Instead, design a group activity for students to understand both the syllabus and course policies. In this way students will get to know their classmates and

begin to make connections as well as learn about the syllabus. When forming groups, use something class related. For example, in a computer programming class, you might ask students to line up according to their birthdays. You can then explain that they just demonstrated the process of “sorting” and as part of the course they will learn how to write programs so that the computer can automate such a task. You can also give a take-home quiz on the syllabus (a great homework assignment for the first class and a great way for students who miss the first class to learn about the requirements!). Scoring the quiz will help you learn what students understand and don’t understand about your expectations and allow you to focus on just those points of the syllabus in the second class session.

- **Determine students’ goals and objectives** while discussing your goals and objectives. Let students know how your course can fit in with their personal or career goals and objectives.
- **Explore students’ fears and apprehensions.** You may want to invite a panel of former students to answer student questions about the course. If you leave the room, students will feel less anxious about discussing whatever is on their minds.
- **Communicate what students can expect of you and what you expect of them.** This can be done orally or by writing students a short letter or memorandum. Baltimore City Community College provides a good example of shared expectations in their Covenant for Success, which was passed as a Board Policy and is published on their web site. The covenant describes the responsibilities of faculty, staff, and students toward ensuring student success.
- **Be respectful of students’ other responsibilities.** Many of your students have obligations to family and jobs that will consume much of their out-of-class time. If possible, include exam and assignment due dates on your syllabus or give students considerable advance notice about important dates.
- **Help students understand the amount of work that goes into being successful.** Explain that being successful in college is less about “brains” and more about willingness to work hard and spend many hours outside of class reading, reviewing, doing assignments, and studying. Help students budget their time by informing them how much time they will need to devote to study outside of class.
- **Don’t dismiss class early on the first day.** If there is time remaining after your syllabus activity, begin communicating the content of your course.
- **Require students who miss the first class** to meet with you in your office so that you can get to know them as well as answer any questions they have about the course or syllabus.

Many of the above suggestions are not just for the first day. You may want to review these suggestions whenever you are starting a new topic, explaining a difficult assignment, or periodically throughout the course. The following strategies and techniques can be used throughout your course:

- **Refer to your syllabus often** so that students understand its importance in communicating information critical to their success.
- **Be flexible and understanding of students’ outside commitments.** Allow students to drop their lowest exam or assignment score and provide alternative activities for students who miss class. For example, in a speech course that requires attendance when classmates are giving speeches, you can arrange with colleagues for students to make up sessions by “becoming the audience” in one of their classes.
- **Get to know your students.**

You should be the first to arrive and last to leave class.

Socialize with your students by attending their clubs or activities, having lunch with them, walking with them between classes, etc.

Visit with students before or after class. Get to know a new student each class.

- **Let your students know that you care about them as individuals and as learners.**

Provide an environment in which there is acceptance of diversity and respect for every individual.

Deal directly with student attitudes by explaining why certain materials are taught as well as why they are taught in particular ways.

Listen carefully to student comments. Rather than dismissing their ideas, add to them to make the students feel that their ideas and opinions are worthwhile.

Use instructional techniques and assignments to appeal to a wide range of learning styles, backgrounds, and skill levels. Be creative in designing lessons, activities, assignments, and assessments. Research indicates that there is a close association between students' cultural background and their preferred learning styles. It is likely that your students' preferred learning styles are not the same as yours. According to Sanchez (2000) Hispanic/Latino students exhibit a high propensity for feedback, concrete learning experiences, cooperative situations (group work) and active experimentation (page 42). Palma-Rivas (2000) reports that African-American students' achievement appears to be positively related to oral experiences and interpersonal relationships. Other students may prefer to learn by lecture and individual work.

Allow students to relate and apply personal, family, or cultural experiences or histories in class assignments, and affirm the validity of their experiences and histories.

Select materials that reflect diverse opinions, authors, etc.

Include practical, real-life examples from many cultures in course content.

Provide timely feedback that encourages student learning and persistence.

- Provide positive reinforcement to student questions by giving respectful answers to questions.
- Return materials as soon as possible with comments. Write something positive on each assignment or exam.
- Use your imagination to devise ways to positively reinforce student accomplishments. Consider using stickers, certificates, and public praise.
- Communicate course progress/grades frequently.

Encourage or require students to visit you in your office. Meeting one-on-one is an opportunity to learn about individual students and answer questions that they might not ask in class. In addition, students who may be timid about coming to your office with questions are more likely to seek your assistance after visiting your office the first time.

Put a sign on your door "Students are welcome here!"

Encourage and praise students. Stress a "you can do it" attitude and emphasize your willingness to provide help.

Tell success stories of past students.

Share your struggles and successes with learning.

Identify students who are headed for academic difficulty as early in the course as possible. Take the initiative to contact and meet with students who are doing poorly. Don't just write "see me" on a paper or exam. Approach the student before or after class to arrange a meeting. Be especially cautious with the passive student who comes to class, sits quietly, doesn't participate, and does poorly on evaluations. Other warning signs you should look for include (Seidman)

- Late or uncompleted assignments
- Repeatedly missing class, coming late, or leaving early
- Not participating in class discussions
- Not taking notes
- Doing poorly on assignments, quizzes, and/or tests
- Not attentive
- Disruptive
- Appears tired or hung over in class

If a student tells you something in confidence, respect the confidence and avoid making verbal or non-verbal value judgments about what they have told you.

Urge students to talk to you about problems, such as changes in work schedule, family obligations, etc. Alternate arrangements can and should be made.

- **Provide many opportunities for success.**

Set high, but realistic expectations. Research has shown that a teacher's expectations have a powerful effect on student's performance (Forsyth and McMillan, 1991). If you act as though you expect students to succeed, they are more likely to succeed.

Provide early opportunities for success. Increase the difficulty of the material as the semester progresses.

Help students set achievable goals for themselves. Encourage students to focus on their continued improvement, not just on their grade on any one test or assignment. Set up a grading system that provides the possibility for students to succeed if they mastered the learning objectives even if they struggled in the first part of the course.

Early and frequent evaluations through quizzes and/or short assignments will help students maintain focus and be successful. In addition, frequent evaluations will provide opportunities for you to make course adjustments if your students are struggling.

- **Use the entire class period at every class meeting** to let the students know they are important. Demonstrate to students that you value their time. Start on time and finish on time!
- **Don't allow the classroom to set up artificial barriers between you and your students.** Circulate around the class as you talk or ask questions rather than standing behind a lectern, desk, or computer for the entire period.
- **Help your students learn how to learn the content in your discipline.**

Ask the reading faculty to do a "readability study" of the texts you use in your classroom.

Preview the texts with your students. Describe how you will use the texts and how you expect students to use the texts in your courses.

Explain time expectations and what students can do to master the content of your courses.

Help students set up study groups.

Integrate study skills.

Don't be afraid to admit that you don't know all the answers, and model how you find answers.

Explain the difference between legitimate collaboration and academic dishonesty; be clear when collaboration is wanted and when it is forbidden.

- **Attendance matters.** Once a student gets into the habit of missing class, it is difficult to change the pattern.

Tell students what your attendance policy is and make them aware of your deep concern for attendance.

Call or e-mail students when they are absent.

Have an attendance policy in which students are required to call when they are absent.

If you have to miss a class, explain why and what you will do to make up the time.

- **Build a sense of community in and out of the classroom.**

Provide opportunities for students to get to know and learn from other students in the class. Integrating academics and social opportunities increases retention.

Use collaborative/cooperative assignments to foster social and academic integration

Use service-learning to create and emphasize community and to truly engage students.

Require that students participate in online discussion groups with you and their classmates.

- **Provide opportunities for students to give you feedback.**

Create a safe environment in which your students feel free to comment on which teaching methods are effective and which ones aren't.

Use classroom assessment techniques (CATS) such as one-minute papers, "the muddiest point" and background knowledge probes to get immediate feedback to help improve student learning (Angelo and Cross, 1993).

Place a suggestion box outside your office.

- **Provide academic advising in your classes and teach students about other campus resources.**

Make sure that counselors and advisors have information to work with your students.

Have a counselor and representatives from various student support services visit your class.

If your syllabus is posted on the web, include links to various campus offices.

If a student needs help, walk him or her to the proper office and make an introduction.

If you require a term paper or research paper

- *Arrange for a library orientation. Librarians would be happy to help.*
- *Have a draft of the paper due early in the term and help students who may need writing or other tutoring obtain the assistance they need.*

If you require computer use, schedule a session in the computer labs to familiarize students with the hardware and software on your campus.

Provide extra credit for participating in on-campus activities and discipline-related clubs.

- **Check whether students satisfied the prerequisites of your course and explain their importance to your students.**
- **Work with other faculty, staff, and administrators to develop shared expectations that can be communicated to all students.**
- **Have discussions with colleagues to share “what works.”**
- **Do classroom research to learn more about what you do to enable student success.** Meet with students who did well despite having risk factors for not persisting. Ask them what difficulties they faced in your course and how they overcame them. Share this information with other students as well as faculty and college employees so that you can work as a team to retain students.

Unfortunately, there is no magical formula that will help you retain 100% of your students every semester. Some students should never have been in your class in the first place. Others withdraw for reasons that are not within your control. You can, however, increase student learning and improve the odds for retention and success by helping students become more connected and involved in their learning.

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