[Vincent Tinto was the keynote speaker at the 1999 annual conference held in Denver on October 8. His remarks are presented below.]

Taking Retention Seriously: Rethinking the First Year of College

Vincent Tinto, Syracuse University

Efforts on most campuses do not go far enough to promote student retention, especially for first-year students. Add-on classes that are disconnected from one another cannot give students the cohesive environment they need to connect with faculty, staff, and other students. What are needed are learning environments, such as learning communities, that actively involve students, faculty members, and staff in shared learning activities.

Introduction

Many colleges speak of the importance of increasing student retention. Indeed, quite a few invest substantial resources in programs designed to achieve that end. Some institutions even hire consultants who promise a proven formula for successful retention. While many colleges have adopted a variety of programs to enhance retention, most programs are add-ons to the existing structure and are marginal to the academic mainstream of institutional life. Institutions invariably adopt what Parker Palmer calls the "add a course" strategy. Need to address the issue of diversity? Add a course in diversity studies. Need to address the success of new students? Add a freshman seminar. The result is growing segmentation of student services into increasingly autonomous fiefdoms in which functional responsibilities are reinforced by separate budget and promotion systems. As a consequence, student experiences are being divided into smaller and smaller pieces; student relationships with faculty, staff, and each other are becoming more narrow and specialized; their learning is increasingly partitioned into smaller disconnected segments.

Therefore, while retention programs abound on our campuses, most institutions have not taken student retention seriously. They have done little to change the overall character of college, done little to alter the prevailing character of student experiences, and therefore done little to address the deeper roots of student attrition. As a result, most efforts at enhancing student retention, though successful to some degree, have had more limited impact than they should or could.

What should institutions do to take student retention seriously? Among other things, institutions must stop tinkering at the margins and make enhancing student retention the linchpin about which they organize their activities. They must move beyond the provision of add-on services and build educational settings that promote the retention of all students. To be serious about student retention, institutions must recognize that the roots of attrition lie not only in their students and the situations they face but also in the very character of the settings, now assumed to be natural to higher education, in which they ask students to learn.

What sorts of educational settings should institutions construct to promote student retention? What should those settings look like? Specifically, what should they look like during the critical first year of college when student persistence is so much in question?

The good news is that we already know the answers to these questions. An extensive body of research identifies the conditions that best promote retention, in particular during the students' first year of college. Though some might argue otherwise, student attributes are largely beyond immediate institutional control. However, the institution can control the settings in which students find themselves, such as classrooms, laboratories, and residential halls. Four institutional conditions stand out as supportive of retention: information/advice, support, involvement, and learning.

First, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide clear and consistent information about institutional requirements. Students need to understand the road map to completion and know how to use it to decide upon and achieve personal goals.

Second, institutions that provide academic, social, and personal support encourage persistence. Support that is readily available and connected to other parts of student collegiate experience leads to retention.

Third, students are more likely to stay in schools that involve them as valued members of the institution. The frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff, and other students have repeatedly been shown to be independent predictors of student persistence. This is true for large

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-10-19 via free access

and small, rural and urban, public and private, and 2- and 4-year colleges and universities. It is true for women as well as men, students of color and Anglo students, and part-time and full-time students. Simply put, involvement matters, and at no point does it matter more than during the first year of college when student attachments are so tenuous and the pull of the institution still so weak.

Fourth, clearly the most important condition that fosters student retention is learning. Students who learn are students who stay. Institutions that are successful in building settings that educate their students are institutions that are successful in retaining their students.

Active involvement seems to be the key. Students who are actively involved in learning activities and spend more time on task, especially with others, are more likely to learn and, in turn, more likely to stay. Unfortunately, most first-year students experience education as isolated learners. They engage in solo performances and demonstrations in what remains a largely show-and-tell learning environment. Their experiences of learning are still very much like a spectator sport in which faculty talk dominates and where few students actively participate. Just as important, students typically take courses as detached, individual units, one course separated from another in both content and peer group, one set of understandings unrelated in any intentional fashion to the content learned in other courses. Though specific programs of study are designed for each major, courses have little academic or social coherence. It is little wonder that students seem so uninvolved in learning. Their learning experiences are not very involving.

Building Learning Communities for First-Year Students

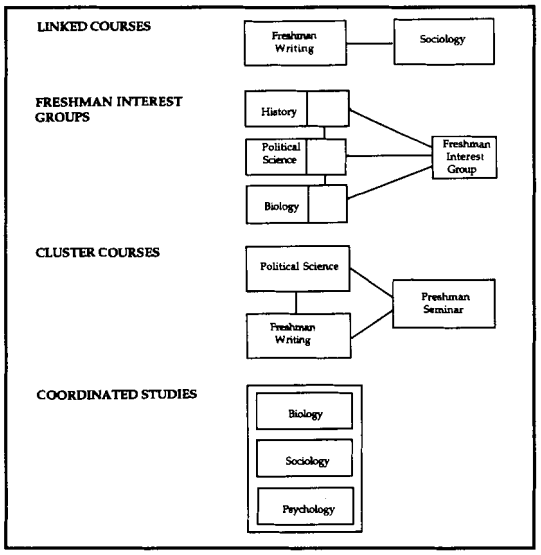
What should institutions do? How should they reorganize the first year of college and construct settings that promote student retention? How should they provide for needed information and advice, support, involvement, and learning? How should they engage the first-year students who work or commute to college?

The last question is not trivial. Despite public impressions to the contrary, most students commute to college and work while taking classes. Many attend part-time and have significant obligations outside the college that limit the time they can spend on campus. For these students, indeed for most students, the classroom may be the only place where they meet faculty members and student peers, the one place where they engage the curriculum. For that reason, the settings we build to promote retention must include, indeed begin with, the classrooms of the campus.

Let me suggest that colleges and universities should make learning communities and collaborative learning a hallmark of the first-year experience. Learning communities, in their most basic form, begin with a kind of coregistration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses with other first-year students. In some cases, learning communities will link students by tying two courses together, typically a course in writing with a course in selected literature or current social problems (Linked Courses). In other cases, the entire first-semester curriculum may be shared so that students in the learning community study the same material throughout the semester. In some large schools, such as the University of Oregon and the University of Washington, 25–30 students in a learning community may attend lectures with 200–300 other students but stay together for a smaller discussion section, often called the Freshman Interest Group, led by a graduate student or upperclassman. In still other cases, students will take all their classes together either as separate, linked classes (Cluster Learning Communities) or as one large class that meets 4 to 6 hours at a time several times a week (Coordinated Studies) (see Figure 1).

The courses in which learning-community students coregister are not coincidentally related. They are typically connected by an organizing theme that gives meaning to their linkage. Coordinating theme classes engender a coherent

Figure 1 Some Common Learning Community Models



Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-10-19 via free access

interdisciplinary or cross-subject learning that is not easily attainable through enrollment in unrelated, stand-alone courses. For example, the Coordinated Studies Program at Seattle Central Community College entitled "Body and Mind" links courses in human biology, psychology, and sociology and asks students to consider how the connected fields of study pursue a singular piece of knowledge, in this case, human behavior.

As described by Gablenick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith in their 1990 book *Learning Communities: Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines*, many learning communities do more than coregister students around a topic. They change the manner in which students experience the curriculum and the way they are taught. Faculty reorganized their syllabi and classrooms to promote shared, collaborative learning experiences among students across the linked classrooms. This form of classroom organization requires students to collaborate in groups and to become active, indeed responsible, for the learning of both group and classroom peers. In this way, students are asked to share not only the experience of the curriculum but also of learning within the curriculum.

Though the content may vary, nearly all learning communities have three objectives in common. One is shared knowledge. By requiring students to take courses together and organizing those courses around a theme, learning communities seek to construct a shared, coherent, curricular experience that is not just an unconnected array of courses. In doing so, they seek to promote higher levels of cognitive complexity that cannot easily be obtained through participation in unrelated courses.

The second commonality is shared learning. Learning communities enroll the same students in several classes so they get to know each other quickly and fairly intimately and in a way that is part and parcel of their academic experience. By asking students to construct knowledge together, learning communities seek to involve students both socially and intellectually in ways that promote cognitive development and to foster an appreciation for the many ways in which one's own knowing is enhanced when other voices are part of that learning experience.

The third goal for learning communities is shared responsibility. Learning communities ask students to become responsible to each other in the process of trying to know. Students participate in collaborative groups, which require them to be mutually dependent on one another; this dependency ensures that the learning of the group does not advance without each member doing her or his part.

As a curricular structure, learning communities can be applied to any content and any group of students. Most often, they are designed for the needs of beginning students. In those instances, one of the linked courses becomes a freshman seminar. Increasingly, they are also being adapted to the needs of undecided students and those who require academic assistance. In these cases, one of the linked courses may be a career exploration, developmental advising, or "learning to learn" (study skills) course. In other cases, one or more course may be developmental in character. In residential campuses, some learning communities have moved into the residence halls. These living-learning communities combine shared courses with shared living. Students, typically those beginning their first semester of college, enroll in a number of linked courses and live together in a reserved part of a residence hall.

More recently, a number of learning communities have used community service as a linking activity or theme for their students. The Evergreen State College, Portland State University, St. Lawrence University, and colleges in the Maricopa Community College District have added service learning to one or more of their linked courses. As an extension of traditional models of community service and experiential learning, service learning combines intentional educational activities with service experience to meet critical needs identified by the communities being served. Unlike voluntarism, service learning is a pedagogical strategy, an inductive approach to education, grounded in the assumption that thoughtfully organized experience is the foundation for learning (Jacoby, 1996). When connected to learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlies them, service learning becomes a shared experience in which students and faculty are able to engage in the time-intensive, interdisciplinary study of complex social problems. Whether used to apply and test theory learned in the classroom or to generate knowledge from experience, service learning in a collaborative setting promotes not only the acquisition of course content but also enhanced intellectual development and a shared sense of responsibility for the welfare of others.

When applied to particular groups of students, as described above, the "faculty" of the learning community almost always combine the work of both academic and student affairs professionals. Indeed such learning communities call for, indeed

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-10-19 via free access

require, the collaborative efforts of both parties. The student affairs staff are typically the only persons on campus who possess the skills and knowledge needed to teach some of the linked courses. For instance, in those learning communities designed for students requiring developmental assistance, the faculty may consist of an instructor for an introductory economics course and two members of a learning support center who teach developmental writing and mathematics.

To be effective, such learning communities require their faculty, that is the academic and student affairs professionals who staff the learning community, to collaborate on both the content and pedagogy of the linked courses. They must work together, as equal partners, to ensure that the linked courses provide a coherent, shared, learning experience. The wealth of knowledge that others bring to the discourse about teaching and learning is one of many benefits of a collaboration where all voices are heard. Furthermore, in leaving, at least momentarily, their respective silos, both academic and student affairs professionals discover the many contributions each makes to the student learning process.

Research on Learning Communities

Research on learning communities and the collaborative pedagogy that underlies them highlights the ways they enhance student learning and persistence (Tinto, 1997; Tinto, Goodsell, & Russo, 1993). First, students in learning communities tend to form their own self-supporting groups that extend beyond the classroom. Learning community students spend more time together out of class than do students in traditional, stand-alone classes, and they do so in ways that students see as supportive. Indeed, some students at the urban community colleges saw those groups as critical to their ability to continue in college. As one older student stated, "The learning community was like a raft running the rapids of my life" (Russo, 1995).

Second, students in learning communities spend more time learning together both inside and outside the classroom. As one student observed, "Class continues even after class." By encouraging continued student interactions, learning communities enable students to bridge the divide between academic classes and the social conduct that frequently characterizes student life. Students tend to learn and make friends at the same time, and as they spend more time together learning, they learn more. This was true of both regularly admitted and provisionally admitted students who required academic assistance (Tinto, Goodsell, & Russo, 1993).

Third, participation in the learning community enhances the quality of student learning. By learning together, everyone's understanding and knowledge is, in the eyes of the participants, enriched. Several students shared the view: "Not only do you learn more, you learn better " (Tinto, 1997).

Fourth, as students learn more and see themselves as more academically and socially engaged, they persist at a substantially higher rate than do comparable students in the traditional curriculum (Tinto, Goodsell, & Russo, 1993). Their involvement with others in learning within the classroom becomes the vehicle through which attachments are made and commitments to the institution engendered.

Finally, student participants' stories highlight powerful messages about the value of collaborative learning settings in fostering what could be called "the norms of educational citizenship," which promote the notion that individual educational welfare is tied inexorably to the educational welfare and interests of other members of the educational community. Students in these programs report an increased sense of responsibility to participate in the learning experience and an awareness of their responsibility for both their learning and the learning of others (Russo, 1995).

Learning communities provide an academic structure within which collaboration among faculty and student affairs professionals is possible and is often required. In some cases, they serve as vehicles through which advising is provided to all first-year students. In other cases, they provide for the integration of academic assistance to topics learned in the linked classes. More important, they are a type of organizational reform that is rooted in the classroom, the one place students meet each other and the faculty and the one place for which faculty and student affairs professionals have responsibility. As such, they are available to all students, faculty, and staff. And unlike other retention programs that sit at the margins of student academic experience, they seek to transform that experience and thereby address the deeper roots of student retention. In effect, they take student learning and retention seriously.

Rethinking the First Year of College

How then should we restructure the first year of college? What would be the distinguishing characteristics that would best promote student persistence?

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-10-19 via free access

First, shared learning should be the norm, not the exception, of student experience. No student should be allowed to go through the first year alone, disconnected from other learners in the college. Whether through learning communities, collaborative learning in stand-alone courses, or other forms of shared activity (e.g., problem-based learning), all students should experience some type of shared learning during their first year of college.

Second, academic advising should be an integral part of the first-year experience, not an adjunct to it. Advising should be woven into the fabric of the freshman year in ways that promote student development and that provide clear, consistent, and accurate information that is easily accessible to students. It should reflect the best professional knowledge of the day. Quite simply, good advising should not be left to chance.

Third, the important concepts that underlie the freshman seminar should be integrated into the very fabric of the first year. The seminar should not be left at the margins of institutional life, its ideas treated as add-ons to the real business of the college. By linking the freshman seminar to other courses in a first-year learning community, students experience the freshman seminar in ways that are connected to their everyday learning experiences.

Fourth, the first year of college should be understood as a developmental year in which new students acquire the skills, dispositions, and norms needed to learn and grow throughout the college years. As a means to meet these objectives, the first year of college should be able to stand as a distinct institutional response to the question "How should the first year of college be structured to best promote student learning in that year and beyond?"

To ensure that such productive responses are possible, the concept of a university college constructed just for first-year students with its own faculty, staff, and administration should be revisited. Such colleges, like those being developed at Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis and at the University of Southern Maine, can provide the organizational environment within which collaborative partnerships between academic and student affairs professionals are valued and creative responses to the questions of the first year are encouraged.

Finally, if we were truly serious about promoting the retention of all, not just some, students, the first year of college would be a year where no student, faculty, or staff would be required to show a badge of belonging. It should be a year of inclusion that promotes the important ideal that all persons can and should have a voice in the construction of knowledge. All our learning would be enriched.

References

Cross, P. (1998). Why learning communities, why now? *About Campus*, July/August: 4–11.

Gablenick, F., MacGregor, J., Matthews, R., & Smith, B. L. (1990). *Learning communities: Creating connections among students, faculty, and disciplines*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 41 (Spring). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Jacoby, B. (1996). *Service learning in higher education: Concepts and practices*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Russo, P. (1995). *Struggling for knowledge: Coordinated studies and collaborative learning*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Syracuse University.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student leaving* (2nd ed.) Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education, 68*, 599–623.

Tinto, V., Goodsell, A., & Russo, P. (1993). Building community among new college students. *Liberal Education, 79*, 16–21.

Author's Notes

Vincent Tinto is Distinguished University Professor and Chair of the Higher Education Program at Syracuse University. He can be reached by writing the program at the School of Education, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York 13244 or by E-mail at vtinto@syr.edu.

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-10-19 via free access