From the Desk of the Director: Retention and Dropout in Higher Education

Retention, from a higher education perspective, has to do with the ability to "hold on to or maintain" enrollment of individuals at various levels in postsecondary education and in a variety of contexts, including at a particular institution, in a program of study, or in a course. It is most often measured in terms of rates—that is, the proportion of individuals in a particular cohort who remain enrolled at a particular point in time divided by the total number of individuals in the cohort who enrolled originally. Retention rates are directly associated with persistence rates and graduation rates and are inversely related to attrition rates and dropout rates. The antithesis of "retention" is "dropout." Therefore, theoretical/conceptual frameworks and literature reviews on retention often focus on factors that are related to dropout from and within institutions of higher education.

According to McCubbin (2003), dropout is one of the greatest problem facing colleges and universities, and has long been a topic of substantial scholarly and administrative interest (Terenzini, 1983, 2005). While attendance in elementary and secondary schools is compulsory, enrollment in institutions of higher education or tertiary schools is voluntary and there is a plethora of reasons why individuals may choose or be forced to withdraw. Until the 1970’s, much of the research on dropout was atheoretical. The research identified a considerable number and variety of statistically significant associations among various student and institutional characteristics and attrition, but offered few explanations about why these associations exist and how these associations affect not only the dropout rate, but also the dropout process (Tinto, 1975).

Vincent Tinto’s (1975) theory is probably the best known attempt to develop a theoretical model to bring theoretical and conceptual coherence to this area of inquiry. In his seminal paper, he noted, "This paper attempts to formulate a theoretical model that explains the processes of interaction between the individual and the institution that lead differing individuals to drop out from institutions of higher learning, and that also distinguishes between those processes that result in definably different forms of dropout behavior (p. 91)."

Tinto’s theory is not without critics. Bean (1982) and Pascalella and Terenzini (1985, 2005) augmented the theory to include the influences of individual, family and societal financial concerns, family and community ties, and special sub-populations of students enrolled at the institution (e.g., students identified by gender, students identified by race/ethnicity, athletes, transfer students, commuter students, working adults, first generation college students, part-time students, student with learning or physical disabilities, veterans, international students, etc.). Similarly, institutions are characterized by whether they are public or private, 2-year or 4-year, or selective or non-selective. They are also characterized by the size of their endowment and their student body or whether they are a minority serving institution, single-gender institution, or ivy league. The interaction of student characteristics with institutional characteristics -- that is, the "fit" -- plays a major role in the magnitude and time to degree of the most important retention rate of all -- the graduation rate.

Presidential Commission on Academic Renewal (PCAR)

The Presidential Commission on Academic Renewal is a significant element in Howard’s methodology for advancing toward its mission. This commission allows the university to redepoly existing resources in a more focused and strategic manner. The purpose of PCAR is to determine the programmatic areas on which Howard will concentrate its future efforts and resources.

PCAR consists primarily of faculty but it also includes a stakeholder group, nationally recognized university leaders, and other external experts.

During the course of the 2009-10 academic year, the Presidential Commission, will review each of Howard’s degree program and make recommendations to the President.

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Thurgood Marshall College Fund - Relationships Between Selected Factors and 6-year Graduation Rates for Selected HBCUs

Currently there is an initiative by the Thurgood Marshall College Fund (TMCF) to research ways to increase graduation rates on Urban Campuses. The graphs displayed below detail preliminary findings presented at a TMCF conference on March 9, 2010. The sample from which the data were drawn consisted of HBCUs that administered the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in 2008, 2009, or 2010. Data were collected on four major areas: 1.) the number of students entering the institution as full-time, first-time, degree/certificate seeking undergraduates in a particular year (cohort); 2.) Race/ethnicity and gender; 3.) The number of students completing their program in 150 percent of normal time to completion; 4.) The number of students that transfer to the institution if transfer is part of the institution’s mission.

The graph on the left displays the institutional (red diamond) data for students completing their program in 150% of the normal time for completion. The regression line shows that for any given 4-year graduation rate, the 6-year graduation rate for the selected HBCUs were roughly 20 points higher. It suffices to say that the additional two years are critical for students to complete their programs at these institutions.

The graph on the right shows the relation between 6-year men’s and women’s graduation rates in 2006. Institutions above the 45° green line had higher graduation rates for men than for women. The fact that the majority of institutions are below the green line indicates that women outperform men in 6-year graduation rates. The regression equation shows that the expected 6 yr. graduation rate for men is 73.5% of the women’s rate minus a fixed 1.9 points.

A Question For You: ????

In this 6-year graduation rate graph, which diamond do you think represents Howard University?

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Accepted Student Survey Results 2010

The Office of Institutional Assessment and Evaluation (OIAE) administered the web-based survey to Howard University’s 2010 accepted students (n=182). Over 3/4 of the accepted students indicated that HU was their first choice.

Over 90% of accepted students considered the following five factors to be “very important” and “important”:

1. Academic programs match with interests (98.1%)
2. Campus life beyond the classroom (98.1%)
3. Extracurricular possibilities (94%)
4. Personal attention one can expect (92.9%)
5. Range/variety of majors (91.5%)

Did You Know?

- 45% of students in 4-year institutions work more than 20 hours per week.
- 60% of students attending community colleges work more than 20 hours per week, and more than 25% work more than 35 hours per week.
- Young people who fail to finish college are often doing it alone financially.
- 23% of college students have dependent children.


Upcoming Activities and Announcements

The OIAE will engage in a number of activities in the upcoming months including the following:

- The Your First College Year (YFCY) survey which began in March 2010 and ends in June 2010. The YFCY is a follow-up to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey that was administered at the beginning of 2009/2010 school year.
- The College Senior Survey (CSS) survey administration began in November and will end in June. The CSS is also a follow-up to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey that was administered at the beginning of 2009/2010 school year.
- The OIAE and CETLA will be hosting an Assessment Institute June 15 - 16 2010. The theme is “Building Bridges in the Academy: Using Assessment Results for Better Outcomes.”
- The OIAE and CELTA will host the 2010 Washington Area Student Learning Assessment Network (WASLAN) Workshop on June 17, 2010. The theme is “Bridging the P-16 Gap Using Large-Scale Assessment Data: A Window into College and Career Readiness.”

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“When Assess is Not Enough” — by Vincent Tinto

The following commentary appeared online in August 2008 as a part of Carnegie Perspectives, a series designed to stimulate discussion on various educational issues.

While many observers applaud the fact that the access to higher education for low-income students has increased over the past two decades and the gap in access between them and higher income students decreased, few have pointed out that the gap in the completion of four-year degrees has not decreased. Indeed, it appears to have increased somewhat. That this is the case reflects a range of issues not the least of which is the well-documented lack of academic preparation which disproportionately impacts low-income students. The result is that while more low-income students are entering college, fewer are able to successfully complete their programs of study and obtain a four-year degree. For too many low-income students the open door to American higher education has become a revolving door. What is to be done? Clearly there is no simple answer to this important question. Yet it is apparent that unless colleges are able to more effectively address the academic needs of low-income students in ways that are consistent with their participation in higher education, little progress is possible. But doing so will not be achieved by practice as usual, by add-ons that do little to change the experience of low-income students and the ways academic support is provided. Too many colleges adopt what Parker Palmer calls the “add a course” strategy in addressing the issues that face them. Need to address the issue of student success, in particular that of new students? Add a course, such as a Freshman Seminar, but do little to reshape the prevailing educational experiences of students during the first year. Need to address the needs of academically underprepared students? Add several basic skills courses, typically taught by part-time instructors, but do nothing to reshape how academic support is provided to students or how those courses are taught. Therefore, while it is true that there are more than a few programs for academically underprepared students, few institutions have done anything to change the prevailing character of their educational experience and therefore little to address the deeper roots of their continuing lack of success.

Fortunately, there are currently some who have, and their efforts could point the way for other colleges to follow. These are efforts that take seriously the task of reforming existing practice. Among these is the use of supplemental instruction that connects academic support to the classrooms in which students are trying to learn. For example at El Camino College in California [1], where students—particularly low-income students—approach college one course at a time, supplemental instruction is aligned with a specific class and its goal is to help students succeed in that one course. In other instances academic support is embedded in a course as is the case in the iBest initiative at Highline Community College in the State of Washington [2].

The adaptation of learning communities for underprepared students in which basic skills courses are linked to other courses in a coherent fashion is another effort that seems to pay off. At LaGuardia Community College [3] in New York, what is being learned is that basic skills courses can be applied to the task of learning in the other course(s) to which those courses are linked. Students participating in LaGuardia’s learning communities support one another, while faculty also work with each other and the students, ensuring that assignments across courses are related. The result? Students are more likely to improve in both performance and persistence.

Other efforts that focus on the teaching of basic skills courses are also bearing fruit. In California and in several other states, faculty are coming to together to explore how they can restructure the teaching of basic skills to better promote the success of their students. An initiative by the Carnegie Foundation and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Strengthening Pre-collegiate Education in Community Colleges (SPECC), is one of these. At the SPECC institutions, collaborative faculty inquiry groups are exploring different approaches to classroom instruction, curriculum, and academic support. Their inquiry into the effects of these approaches engages a wide range of data, including examples of student work, classroom observations, and quantitative campus data.

What these and other efforts have in common is the recognition of the centrality of the classroom to student success and the need to restructure our efforts and the support students receive in those places of learning which, for most low-income students, may be the only place on campus where they meet each other and the faculty and engage in learning. Lest we forget, most academically underprepared low-income students do not think of success as being framed by the first year experience, the second year experience and so on as do many academic researchers. Rather it is, in their view, constructed one course at a time. You succeed in one course, then move on to the second course, and so on. If our efforts to promote the success of low-income students, especially those who enter college academically underprepared, are to succeed, our efforts must be directed to those courses and the classrooms in which they take place, one course at a time.

What these and other initiatives also demonstrate is that the success of academically underprepared students does not arise by chance. It does not arise from practice as usual, but is the result of intentional, structured, and proactive efforts on their behalf that change the way we go about the task of providing students the support they need to succeed in college. Without such support, the access to college we provide them does not provide meaningful opportunity for success.

Dr. Vincent Tinto is Professor Professor at Syracuse University and until recently Chair of the Higher Education Program. His research focuses on higher education and student access. He was a visiting scholar with the Carnegie foundation.