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# Student Retention in Higher Education

## Resources for Faculty

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# Introduction

Thank you for downloading our selection of chapters focusing on Student Retention in Higher Education!

In an increasingly competitive and results-oriented higher education market, student retention is of key importance to institutions and their faculty, as universities look to improve graduation rates and decrease the loss of tuition revenue from students either dropping out or moving to a different institution.

This FreeBook has been created to highlight some of the main factors that influence student retention figures, as well as some of the steps that can be taken to improve them, providing a selection of excerpts from our key books in this area. The first chapter, *The Roots of Attrition,* explores the causes of students dropping out – what are the social factors behind this and how does it differ geographically? Chapter 2, *A Student-Centred Approach to Retention*, argues for the need for a student-centred approach to retention because of the sheer diversity of the students applying for universities. Chapter 3, *Becoming Student-Centered: The Right Way,* explores different methods for becoming student-centred. Chapter 4, *Prepare for Class, Attend and Participate!,* uses the tools and terminology of behavioural economics to examine ways of promoting learning for students in college and increase the probability they stay and earn a degree. Finally, Chapter 5, *Beyond 'Student Experience',* argues for the need for a step away from focusing on student satisfaction and instead refocusing to the academic experience students face.

We hope you enjoy reading through these selected chapters, be sure to click through and learn more about each title. Each chapter is just a small sample of our content, visit our website to find out more about the books these are excerpted from and to browse our full selection of books in this area.

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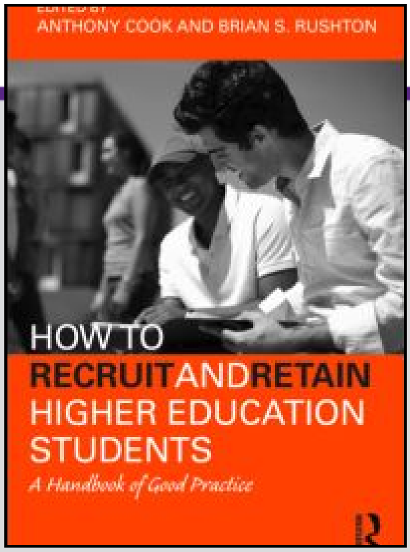
CHAPTER

1

# THE ROOTS OF ATTRITION

## ANTHONY COOK




This chapter is excerpted from

*How to Recruit and Retain Higher Education Students: A Handbook of Good Practice*

by Tony Cook and Brian S. Rushton.



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# THE ROOTS OF ATTRITION

Excerpted from *How to Recruit and Retain Higher Education Students*

**Summary**

The general causes of student drop out are well known and although the dropout rates vary from country-to-country, the root causes remain a set of unrealistic expectations on behalf of prospective students and inadequate student support in universities. While much effort has been devoted to keeping students in the teaching programmes and institutions that they have joined, less attention is paid to supporting students to make good choices before entry. Students have to adapt rapidly to changes in lifestyle, as well as in teaching and assessment methods. Institutions can forewarn prospective students of the changes they will be expected to make and can make adaptations to their own practices to make the transitions easier. In addition the social changes that students will have to undertake in a short period of time should not be underestimated. Institutions can assist students to make appropriate choices by helping secondary schools to prepare them adequately, making explicit those attributes that will be required of a successful student and the support they are prepared to offer during the application process.

**Introduction**

The title of this chapter is taken from the work of Joe Cuseo at Marymount College, California, and illustrates that we need to understand student attrition not only as it happens and as it affects both students and the staff who are then in contact with them, but also as a problem that has been growing in the lives of students for some time past (Cuseo 2002). Many of the factors that cause students to leave university were initiated long before they even thought of applying to enter higher education. It is these deep-rooted factors to which we seek to offer solutions.

If there were a single solution to the problems of student attrition then all institutions would be applying it and the problem would fade into insignificance. Student early leaving is, however, a complex and intractable problem with multiple causes and therefore multiple cures. The cures vary with the student population, the institution and those who have to enact them. The practices described in this book have worked well for those who have practised them but they will all need adapting to suit local circumstances.

**The Reasons Why Students Leave Early**

Cuseo (2002) identified nine causes for students leaving programmes early.

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Excerpted from *How to Recruit and Retain Higher Education Students*

They are:

- Academic under-preparedness
- Academic boredom
- Difficulties managing the transition to university
- Uncertainties about their long-term goals
- The irrelevance of the university curriculum
- Social isolation
- A mismatch between student expectation and early experiences
- Low commitment to persist
- Finance

These factors are not independent since one may be the cause of another but together they give an overall impression of what goes wrong in a student's life when he/she makes the decision to leave university early. They fall into two groups: those causes that pre-date university entry and those that occur after entry. The origins of reasons such as academic under-preparedness, managing the transition to university, long-term goals and problems with expectations are all present before entry. However, that does not mean that universities and colleges can have no input into their resolution and case studies of good practice are available (Cook *et al.* 2006, Macintosh *et al.* 2006). Although the list produced by Cuseo (2002) has been drawn from an American experience it has resonance with research in other countries. Thus, the National Audit Office (NAO 2002) in the UK identified the following reasons for student withdrawal:

- Lack of preparedness for higher education
- Changing personal circumstances or interests

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Excerpted from *How to Recruit and Retain Higher Education Students*

- Financial matters
- The impact of undertaking paid work
- Dissatisfaction with the programme or institution

Again these are divisible into causes present prior to entry and those that are not. Thus preparedness and being dissatisfied are associated with a poor knowledge of what will be required in higher education, whereas changing personal circumstances and finances are not necessarily as predictable. Surveys of students who do not continue their studies beyond year one support the summary findings of Cuseo and the NAO. Thus Yorke and Longden (2008) report that the most frequently agreed with statements by students when explaining their own early leaving were:

The programme was not what I expected (48 per cent of respondents).

The way the programme was taught did not suit me (42 per cent).

I simply realised that I had chosen the wrong field of study (42 per cent).

These reasons are remarkably persistent over time since they vary little from a similar study a decade before (Yorke *et al.* 1997). Clearly, identifying the causes of early leaving has not, by itself, led to effective solutions since student early leaving is now just as much of a problem as it was a decade ago in the UK, in the USA and elsewhere (NAO 2007, van Stolk *et al.* 2007).

From the viewpoint of this book, the significance of many of these factors is that they have their origins and are potentially soluble before the student enrols at the university. They are associated with the decision to attend a particular institution and follow a particular subject and, therefore, with the factors students use to choose what programme and what institution to which to apply. Changing the ways in which students engage with institutions and particularly with institutional information before entry has the potential, therefore, to address a significant proportion of early leaving. The impact can be to change the decisions prospective students make, to encourage students to make more informed decisions and/or to change their expectations such that they are less

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disappointed on arrival and are encouraged to prepare themselves more thoroughly for their higher education experience.

**Student Retention as a Global Problem**

The survival rate for students (i.e. the percentage of those initially enrolled who eventually graduate) varies between major countries from over 80 per cent in Japan to just over 50 per cent in the USA. The UK, with a rate of nearly 80 per cent, is among the highest in the developed world (NAO 2007). This survival rate is an issue because students may not achieve their goals or they may take longer, and institutions invest time and money in education that has no measurable outcomes. Further, in most countries tax-payers' money is invested in universities and student attrition is perceived to be a waste of resources that may be more productively deployed elsewhere.

Many of the factors associated with student withdrawal are not solely attributable to the student. Students sometimes fail academically, not so much because they lack application but because they have misunderstood institutional expectations (Scott and Graal 2006). Further, a student's failure to integrate into an institution might be as much about that institution's failure to provide adequate facilities as it is about the failure of individual students to cope with change (Yorke and Longden 2008). Students, therefore, are not necessarily totally to blame when they do not complete their programme. Indeed, there has been a major change in institutional philosophy over the last decade, which has seen institutions respond to student withdrawal by setting up proactive student retention programmes designed to support students through those circumstances during which they might have formerly withdrawn.

Much of the research and the development of practice, however, has been on investigating and developing the experience of students in year one (Moxley *et al.* 2001, Peelo and Wareham 2002) rather than on resolving the reasons behind making poor entry decisions in the first place. Some of this focus has been because institutions can more easily change the ways in which they deal with students once they have been admitted than they can change the perceptions of incoming students. The imperative for some change has undoubtedly been brought about by increased public scrutiny of student retention as a 'value for money' issue, as evidenced at least in part by university league tables (*Guardian* 2008, *Times* 2008) and, in the UK, by the increased availability of university data through the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA 2008). Changing

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those factors that impact on students prior to entry is more difficult because they are not always within the control of institutions.

Students giving reasons for leaving such as 'The institution was not as I expected', 'Stress related to the demands of the programme' and 'The amount of contact with academic staff ' (Yorke and Longden 2008) are clear indicators that the pre-entry conversation between prospective students and institutions has not successfully conveyed the subject expectation, the nature of learning in higher education or even the nature of the institution. This mutual understanding of needs should be clear if students are to choose an appropriate programme or to prepare themselves adequately for their first year experience.

Students rely on information from peers, parents (and other relatives) and school careers advisors to narrow down the myriad of options to a manageable number. They then depend on the information which institutions distribute to market themselves and their programmes and on the personal experiences they have when interacting with the institution to finalise their selection (HEFCE 1999). In seeking to encourage students to make appropriate choices, therefore, it is important not only to address applicants directly but also to influence those who advise them. In addition, there is a plethora of advice offered by the media in the form of league tables, which institutions believe influence the choices of the younger students (HEFCE 2008). The implication of early leaving as a result of not understanding what the experience will be like is that one or more of these information sources has been inadequate, misleading or has been misinterpreted.

In the UK, there has been an emphasis on institutions retaining the students they have recruited rather than recruiting students they can retain. If the current emphasis on retention results in universities recruiting those students who are most likely to persist then further expansion of the sector will depend on the better preparation of students prior to entry, i.e. we need a notion of 'readiness' as well as being well qualified.

Universities are strange places with transient populations of large numbers of relatively young people with their attendant problems of social adjustment and evolving ambitions. They offer an educational experience to those who volunteer to undergo it. How ready are these volunteers to undertake what is on offer? How ready are institutions to adjust what is on offer to suit those that they recruit?

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Excerpted from *How to Recruit and Retain Higher Education Students*

**Academic Readiness**

Many of Cuseo's reasons for early leaving can be summarised as 'underpreparedness'. This encompasses a range of factors for which students might be expected to have prepared themselves. Academic under-preparedness results from studying an inappropriate range of subjects prior to entry or studying in a way that does not prepare them adequately for university programmes.

The Advanced Level General Certificate of Education has been held to be the 'gold standard' of British educational qualifications over many years. It is the qualification that forms the basis for the entry of most UK students to university and has been exported world-wide. A comparison of secondary level assessment with university assessment over time serves to illustrate that the two schemes have diverged over the last few decades.

In the mid 1960s, A level assessment was closely aligned with first year university assessments. A two-year A level course was typically assessed using three three-hour examination papers, each of about two sides of A5 in length. All were essay style questions, i.e. they required the interpretation of the question, the selection of information, the construction of an answer and its expression in coherent English. The syllabuses for *all* subjects in both the post- 16 and post-18 examinations were contained in one A5 booklet of 116 pages (JMB 1965).

A typical question in A level biology was in the following format:

Make a clearly labelled diagram to show the structure of a typical mammalian eye. Describe briefly the mechanisms whereby: (a) the amount of light entering can be controlled, (b) adjustments can be made for viewing objects at varying distances. (JMB 1965: Biology Paper II)

The following year, at the University of Birmingham, a similar topic was assessed using the following question:

Give an account of the functions of the various parts of the vertebrate ear. (University of Birmingham 1966: examination paper for Course 1A)

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Excerpted from *How to Recruit and Retain Higher Education Students*

The questions are of similar complexity and the supporting material for both would have been standard texts in the topic. This would have been the routine form of specification of syllabuses and forms of assessment of the time. A level syllabuses have developed to lend much more support to candidates. Not only are topics specified in greater detail but the examining boards produce extensive support material to show the level of detail required. Scrutiny of the questions and the supporting materials suggests that candidates need learn and understand little that has not been explicitly specified in detail by the examining board (Cook 2005). Thus where the 1965 syllabuses were typically just two sides of A5, the syllabus for biology alone in 2004 was presented in an A4 booklet of 62 pages (NISEAC 2002). This is supported by a 72 page A4 booklet specifying the detail in which each of the topics will be assessed and by mark schemes for past papers that give, in even more detail, the information required.

The explicitness that now accompanies publicly set and marked examinations is not, of itself, detrimental. Candidates should know what it is they are supposed to be learning. To specify a course in such a way as to delimit what is to be learned, however, can only serve to inhibit the exploration of the subject and results in teacher centred approaches to learning.

The typical university syllabus is not specified in the same way and students would not have access to the detail available at A level nor would they have access to past mark schemes. A programme specification describes degree programmes in the UK and states ‘the outcomes that should result from successful completion of an individual programme’ (QAA 2006). It specifies what all successful students should be able to do rather than to delimit the subject. Further, the student is typically assessed with a diversity of assessment methods that, although they will have associated mark schemes, rarely exclude reward for knowledge and understanding that has not been explicitly specified.

The switch from teacher-dependent learning to independent learning, from a teacher who is independent from the assessment scheme to a teacher who is also the assessor and from a syllabus that limits what is to be learned to one that specifies only what *must* be learned is confusing for many. This is especially true when it may be the student who is the only participant in this system who is aware of the change.

Admitting students onto inappropriate programmes can arise from an institutional imperative to fill a programme by adjusting the entry requirements for that programme.

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Excerpted from *How to Recruit and Retain Higher Education Students*

Although ensuring an adequate range of prior academic experiences should be accomplished by specifying subject based entry qualifications this is not always possible. For example, in the UK an Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education in Science (AVCE Double Award) consists of six compulsory and six elective modules (from a choice of 25 modules in all). Although, therefore, there is a guarantee that a core curriculum has been studied neither the depth of study nor the range of topics can be. In addition, in an examining system that can only sample the syllabus, students may actively avoid subject areas that eventually have to be tackled in a university programme.

The ways in which students study prior to entry are even more difficult to control and may require remedial action after entry, such as a greater emphasis on small group teaching, first year experience seminars, skills modules, etc. The change in the teaching and learning methods should not be a surprise to students if institutions have properly informed them during the processes of application and selection.

Parents and careers teachers to whom prospective students look for advice often fail to convey the differences between tertiary and secondary education. The former requires a greater level of intrinsic motivation since much of the time is self-organised and much of the work is done without overt reward either in the form of praise or credit. Intrinsic motivation is encouraged by a feeling that success is related to one’s own effort and by having fun with the subject. Extrinsic motivation derives from external factors such as pressure from teachers and parents, and from systems of reward and punishment on the basis of results relative to prescribed outcomes. Evidence to support the notion of the positive, but temporary, effect of extrinsic factors comes from surveys of school performance compared with higher education performance in the UK.

When compared on a like-for-like basis the performance of students from independent (private) schools in the UK is poorer at university than those from state schools (HEFCE 2003). There has been no direct investigation into the causes of this effect but it is speculated that in the private school sector students receive a higher level of coaching specific to the entry examination. This coaching may be composed of accurate predictions of questions in national examinations, intensive instruction closely aligned to the syllabus, the selection of examination boards and syllabuses where higher grades are more likely and more effective appeals against initial decisions. This close support results in better performance in examinations but this is a poorer predictor of performance in the university sector when such support is removed.

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Excerpted from *How to Recruit and Retain Higher Education Students*

The subject range at university can also vary from that experienced in the secondary system. In the UK, the choice of entry qualifications can be quite restricted and supporting subjects integrated into the main subject-based syllabus. Thus physics and mathematics will be integrated into an engineering syllabus but at university these supporting subjects may well be taught by subject specialists, even as components of degree programmes in physics or mathematics. Many students are unprepared for such intensive study of ancillary subjects.

**Social Readiness**

Banning (1989) developed a campus ecology approach to student retention that focused on the benefits of change in promoting student development. While it is relevant to all aspects of student transition it is most appropriate to the change in a student's lifestyle. The greater the difference between the sending environment (normally school and living in a family) and the receiving environment (the university), the greater will be the stress on the student.

Such stress can lead to rapid adaptation and personal growth for some. Others, however, find coping with these changes overwhelming and this can have a detrimental effect on student satisfaction, academic achievement and personal growth. Change, therefore, is seen to be an essential component of student development but if we ask students to change too much then it can lead to declining academic performance and a failure to integrate socially. The fit between the institution and a new student has to be judged, therefore, in terms not only of the nature of the changes to be expected but also of the resilience of individual students to that change. Clearly admissions tutors cannot be expected to select students on the basis of these characteristics but those who work with prospective students should make it clear that a factor in their choice of institution should be the extent to which they are comfortable with such changes.

There is a limit to the extent that institutions can make changes in lifestyle easier for new students. However, high levels of interaction among students, strong staff–student contact, the availability of accommodation in halls of residence and extensive extra-curricular activities all have a strong positive effect on student success (Banning 1989).

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Excerpted from *How to Recruit and Retain Higher Education Students*

Tinto's (1987) Theory of Student Integration is the most widely accepted and used model of student transition. Tinto explains a decision to withdraw or persist as the culmination of a longitudinal process that determines the ability of the student to integrate into academic and social aspects of university life. Key factors in Tinto's model concern the attitude of the students before entry, viz. their intentions (career and other personal goals) and level of commitment (how well motivated they are towards the programme and/or institution).

These factors interact with a student's early experience at the institution to influence that student's persistence. The factors that influence this persistence include *flexibility* (how adaptable a student proves to be), *congruence* (the extent to which the institution provides an acceptable match to the student's prior academic and/or social expectations), *difficulty* (the extent to which the student attains appropriate academic standards) and *isolation* (the extent to which the student is included in social activities and integrates through friendships and relationships with staff and peers).

The message from Tinto, therefore, is that students leave university early for a broad set of reasons, some of which they have brought with them to the institution, some of which arise from the institution's behaviour and others are a product of a lack of congruence between individual students and institutional structures, personnel and procedures. The Tinto model has been criticised because it lacks experimental support and focuses on a sociological explanation for student attrition rather than a psychological one. Even attempts to identify elements of the model have, at best, only provided evidence that is consistent with it rather than offering definitive support. Alternative models have been presented (Bean and Eaton 2000) but have not gained wide acceptance. In a practical sense, of course, it does not matter whether the model is 'true' provided it is used as a framework around which to develop practice which is itself evaluated progressively. Thus it can provide the basis for action research and consequent improvements in outcomes and the rejection of changed practices that are ineffective whether it is 'true' or not.

In their selection of qualitative feedback from students who had left their programme early, Yorke and Longden (2008) quote a series of student comments highlighting the institutional environment as a being a key factor in their leaving. Thus the distance from a town, being in a big city, the distance from home and the quality of accommodation are all cited as reasons contributing to a decision to leave. These clearly reflect changes in the lifestyle of individual students to which they were not prepared to adapt.

# THE ROOTS OF ATTRITION

Excerpted from *How to Recruit and Retain Higher Education Students*

It would be naive to expect that all students could find out all they needed to know before applying to a particular institution. The location of the buildings and the quality of accommodation, however, can easily be discovered. It is worth asking the question 'What have those students who leave early found out in the first few weeks of being at university that they did not know before they came?' Clearly this is not the distance from home or the distance between the institution and the town, although it might be the condition of the accommodation or the fact that the buses run infrequently and at unsatisfactory times. What students find out is the effect that these factors will have on them and this applies particularly to students who have not ventured far from the family in the past. An element of preparing for university, therefore, can be the extent to which prospective students have already adapted to being independent and are prepared to accept the living conditions they find at university, be it living in halls of residence, in lodgings or commuting from home.

Some students will be living away from home and residential induction events designed to integrate the class can have unexpected effects. For example, a first year environmental studies student on a week's off-campus residential induction event complained that:

It was the first week at university and I'd never been away for a whole week before. I come from a large family and being away from them and having no contact at all was dreadful. We should have gone somewhere with a mobile phone signal. (McLaughlin *et al.* 2006: 35)

Added to the strangeness of new surroundings is the presence of a new set of colleagues. Most students have just left a stable period of their lives in which they have worked with the same group of people for seven or possibly more years. Moving to university or even staying at home can be an unsettling experience for some. They can feel cut off from former friends or colleagues, or if living at home can fail to integrate into the social system at university and feel like outsiders (Sheader and Richardson 2006). Yorke and Longden (2008) in their analysis of qualitative data from students who have dropped out cite examples of students with problems associated with having to share accommodation and having to fit in with students with more outgoing lifestyles and perhaps a less academic focus to their university career.

# THE ROOTS OF ATTRITION

Excerpted from *How to Recruit and Retain Higher Education Students*

**Institutional Responses**

Whatever the root causes of student attrition, some can be addressed by modifying the first year at university, others by attempting to prepare students better before they arrive and yet others by improving the match between prospective students and the programme they have chosen to follow.

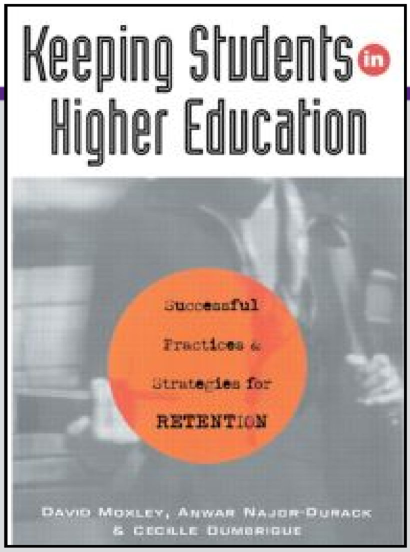
Higher education institutions have little control over the formal preparation of the students who choose to enter their degree programmes. Entry qualifications tend to be set to a national standard and a national curriculum and the means by which they are achieved receive little public scrutiny. Institutions can make explicit, however, the qualities that they expect to have been developed in their new students prior to entry. The audience for this information is not only prospective students but also their formal and informal advisors (parents, siblings, careers advisors, teachers, the media, etc.). Where disparities persist institutions can develop community outreach programmes to advise students directly about the nature of higher education and ongoing communication with applicants can support the development of appropriate expectations prior to entry.

*A fully referenced version of this text can be accessed through our website.*

CHAPTER

2

# A STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH TO RETENTION




This chapter is excerpted from

*Keeping Students in Higher Education: Successful Strategies and Practices for Retention*

by Cecile Dumbrigue, David Moxley, Anwar Najor-Durack.



Learn more

# A STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH TO RETENTION

Excerpted from *Keeping Students in Higher Education*

**MAIN POINTS OF THE CHAPTER**

• Post-secondary and higher education are changing dramatically. New types of post-secondary education are emerging to fulfil the economic, cultural, social and service needs of both emerging and developing societies. This changing character of post-secondary and higher education in turn fosters a wide spectrum of student roles at all levels including developmental education, technical education, pre-professional education, undergraduate education, and post-graduate and professional education. • As student roles proliferate and change, patterns of persistence change. Students now have a diversity of options for completing their education as higher education restructures to meet new demographic, economic and technological realities. Changes are occurring to the delivery of postsecondary and higher education in response to student role change including the use of technology to repackage courses and requirements, modification of ways credits are earned and the manner in which students demonstrate their proficiencies.

• At the same time as student roles are changing, students face a multitude of social and personal issues that intrude into the educational setting and influence the persistence and retention of students.

• To promote retention and persistence of students, higher education must appreciate the diversity of educational opportunities available to students and how they want to take advantage of these opportunities, student demographics and backgrounds, how students undertake their educational careers, and how students learn and achieve educational outcomes. • Given the extent of social and economic change, students may need to approach their education at several different levels. It is not unusual for students to seek education to fulfil immediate situational employment needs, to prepare for specific careers, to make career transitions and to engage in lifelong education.

• The nature of this diversity requires post-secondary and higher education to understand the educational aspirations, aims and resources their students or potential students possess and the realities they face. Understanding this diversity sets the stage for a student-centred response to retention and persistence.

• A student-centred approach means that the institution of post-secondary or higher education responds to the educational aims of all students by helping them to get the

# A STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH TO RETENTION

Excerpted from *Keeping Students in Higher Education*

tools they need, fulfil their needs and resolve the issues they face so that they persist in their education and achieve an educational outcome they value.

To define retention solely as a narrow educational issue belies many ways of thinking about and looking at this challenge in higher education. Indeed, retention requires staff, students and administrators in higher education to appreciate its broad scope. For higher education, these are changing times, as societies redefine the nature and substance of post-secondary education and training. No longer can we think of higher education as beginning with the traditional three or four-year curriculum that students start immediately following secondary education and complete in the allotted time.

New patterns of higher education are emerging within the context of developing countries, post-industrial societies and postmodern communities. The three- or four-year, 'all at once' educational career no longer characterizes the undergraduate student. And those students who pursue post-graduate and professional education no longer follow the stereotype. Students do not necessarily move on to professional and post-graduate education immediately following the completion of their undergraduate work. They may volunteer, work full time, engage in other developmental or career exploration activities, or raise families as they prepare - emotionally, intellectually, financially and socially - to continue their academic careers, if indeed they choose to do so at all.

Students also face a multitude of social issues, and serious challenges to participation in and subsequent completion of a post-secondary or higher education course of studies. Personal issues that relate to educational background, opportunities, family, health, financial stability and even safety can play into the retention equation. Also, the pace of social change can bring about role change in personal relationships and families with the consequence that participation in higher education itself may cause family strain and conflict as students change their values, attitudes and sense of the world. Of course, we must also incorporate here the rapid pace of societal change. Changes within principal social institutions, particularly the economy and the world of work, create retention challenges. More than ever before, students must balance work, income and education and, as a consequence, they may need to prolong their educational career so that they can afford to complete their studies or training. The challenge of retention is indeed complex.

# A STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH TO RETENTION

Excerpted from *Keeping Students in Higher Education*

**RETENTION AND DIVERSITY**

Post-secondary education is now as diverse as the students who seek it. Five aspects of the diversity of post-secondary education are of particular importance to appreciating the idea of retention. These are:

• the diversity of post-secondary and higher educational alternatives and opportunities;

• the diversity of student demographics;

• the diversity of students' educational careers;

• the diversity of student learning;

• the diverse role education serves in the modern lifespan.

**Diversity of educational opportunities**

There are now more and more forms of post-secondary education so that traditional undergraduate and post-graduate courses are no longer the norm or no longer the sole options available to students. Technical schools, specialized vocational training institutes, community colleges, four-year liberal arts schools, research universities, open and distance learning, flexible adult education and even modern apprenticeships reflect only some of the sheer diversity of what is now available to students. This diversity offers students a range of opportunities as they think about their educational development, their personal growth and development, their employability and their prospects for career preparation or change.

These alternatives raise issues about what is right for particular students in terms of their educational backgrounds, their current maturity and their aspirations. They raise issues about what form of higher or post-secondary education is a good match for a student, and this is a factor in his or her choice of institution as well as specific course.

We cannot ignore the role of information and educational communications technology that is rapidly changing the face of higher education. Increasingly students have options involving how to consume or otherwise participate in education. They can affiliate with several different institutions simultaneously as technology reduces the significance and influence of physical distance. Internet courses, online learning, distance learning, videoconferencing, knowledge-based systems and Group Ware are some of the technological alternatives that help and will help to package courses in different ways, change teaching and learning dramatically, and offer new ways of interacting among students and teaching staff. Technology offers many exciting options that can even redefine what educational institutions mean by student, persistence and retention.

Implied here is that the educational and personal assets and strengths, personal and social needs, perspectives, values and self-conception of the student are critical ingredients to producing this good fit. The diversity of post-secondary and higher educational options suggests that students need insights into what they are choosing and why they are choosing a specific educational option. Retention as an idea, and as a process of helping students to persist in their education, is linked to the fundamental idea of match and goodness of fit.

**Diversity of student demographics**

Students are probably now more diverse as a population than ever before. The demographics of students and potential students are changing at this writing, and they have changed tremendously over the past two decades. Students bring into educational settings considerable diversity in terms of age, gender, class, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and learning orientations and styles. Language, customs, traditions and ultimately culture combine to produce classrooms in which students from very different and diverse backgrounds introduce very different perspectives into post-secondary and higher education as they interact with their peers, instructors, teachers, tutors, advisors and administrators. A measure of the competence of teachers and administrators is their awareness of diversity, their sensitivity to student differences in background, experiences and culture, and, ultimately, by how they make use of these demographic differences in the learning process.

**The importance of match**

This aspect of diversity also makes the ideas of student-institutional match and goodness of fit an important feature of retention. Think about the following four examples and their implications for retention:

# A STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH TO RETENTION

Excerpted from *Keeping Students in Higher Education*

**• At the age of 40 a woman returns to higher education to complete a bachelor's degree that was interrupted some 16 years before. She wants to prepare for a post-graduate qualification. Her husband does not want her to complete her education, and her marital relationship is quite stormy as a result. Other adult or 'mature' students can relate to this situation, but teaching staff pay little attention to these personal experiences in either their advice or informal support, or in the classroom.**

**Implication:** Is this a student who may drop out as she heeds the advice of her husband? Or will she persist in her educational work? Perhaps the marital relationship dissolves and the student finds herself in crisis. Will she then decide to leave higher education in order to address more immediate personal, family and financial issues?

• A student leaves a closely knit ethnic community that values the work ethic and the pursuit of gainful employment to attend a local college several times a week. The student's family and community stress that post-secondary education should lead to subsequent employment in a high-status profession. However, the student wants a career in the fine arts. He experiences considerable stress in trying to reconcile his family's values with his own, and he cannot access much help or understanding on campus.

**Implication:** Who will help this student interpret his educational aims to his family and community? Will he withdraw from his involvement with his family and deal with any consequences that may jeopardize his status as a student? Will he feel alienation in the college because he cannot find a support system that helps him to value his choices?

• The first in her family to enrol on a post-graduate course, a young low-income student juggles employment with child-rearing responsibilities. By any measure, her stress level is very high, and she does not have the resources to obtain the mental health care she needs in order to manage this stress. The college mental health facility does not offer resources for her to obtain support from others experiencing a similar situation.

**Implication:** Where will this student find the mental health care that she needs at this time in her life? Will the care she receives help her address the realities of single parenthood, work and college? Can the staff of her academic department help her handle or resolve these issues? Is it even their role to address these concerns?

# A STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH TO RETENTION



• Adam learns best through multi-media presentations rich in visual display. He enjoys manipulating his environment and understanding the consequences of his action. His primary and secondary education was rich in media and electronic technologies that supported his acquisition of core educational competencies. He gets bored with more traditional teaching methods. The traditional lectures of the liberal arts course he is enrolled on are not a good method to support Adam's learning.

**Implication:** Can the liberal arts college engage Adam in a manner that empowers and fosters his learning? Are the staff willing to integrate new teaching and instructional methods to engage Adam? Or will Adam decide that higher education is not for him and that he has to look elsewhere for the knowledge he seeks?

These examples reflect diversity and the role of demographics in defining the need for retention. In the first case, age and gender interact to create one situation, and in the next two cases ethnicity and income create different retention needs. Each example, however, demonstrates how important match or goodness of fit is to retention and the ultimate success of the student.

The diversity that each situation reflects creates different needs. The probability of a student discontinuing or even failing education lurks in these situations. A focus on retention must address a student's situation and what each one faces in the pursuit of educational aims. The demographics operating in each situation suggest that retention is far more than educational preparation, and far more than the mastery of educational competencies. Retention requires a psychosocial perspective, and it must address the personal and social needs that all students experience in their quest to achieve success in the educational situation of their choosing.

**Diversity of students' educational careers**

Educational careers are dynamic and will remain dynamic as we move away from traditional paradigms of post-secondary education and training. Students are adopting new methods in the manner in which they persist towards a degree, the courses they select to make them employable immediately and the manner in which they experiment with fields, professions and disciplines in order to identify their vocational, educational and career preferences. Some students may appear to be chaotic or undisciplined. Some students may appear to be confused or undirected or unfocused. But they may be negotiating their education in their own way, not bothering to adhere to the expectations of curriculum, pace and sequence their teachers and tutors try to dictate.

Financial pressures may require students to implement an employability strategy in which they take a package of courses (eg in information science) so that they can get an entry-level job as they continue to work toward a degree. Educational needs may suggest to students that they take local college courses in order to prepare for more rigorous study at university. Students with immediate employment objectives may take a very specialized course of technical training and then seek credit for this course as they move on in their education. Consider this example. A young student, age 25, has been 'in and out' of a four-year college course over the past seven years. He has completed 60 per cent of the institution's graduation requirements by completing its courses and by transferring core requirements from a local college that offers lower-level educational opportunities. Tutors think that he is not persisting and lacks sincerity.

However, coming from a family of modest means, the student has been alternating work and education. He is very sincere, obtains good grades and fears how his record will be interpreted by admissions officials when he applies for law school upon graduation at the age of 27.

The retention challenge for this student may be seen from a longitudinal perspective. The student is persisting but in a manner that is not consistent with more traditional notions of undergraduate education. How does the institution facilitate the success of such students over the course of the educational career they choose for themselves, which may extend over a long period of time? The student who moves in and out of active participation in education in order to earn money may obtain special supports to make this choice a successful one. Or the challenge may be met through helping the student to garner the resources to complete his or her educational objectives in six years rather than nine. Or the challenge can be met by helping the student navigate the transition from undergraduate to professional education.

Educational support takes on a new meaning in this approach to retention. It does not merely involve equipping students with core academic skills even though this is an important aspect of any retention programme. The ideas of goodness of fit and match have a role here. It is increasingly becoming important to know students from a personal perspective, and to understand their educational aims and aspirations in order to match a retention programme to their educational direction. *Retention is the process of helping students to meet their needs so they will persist in their education toward the achievement of the educational aims they value. Retention can achieve this through the mustering of supports that enable students to be successful, and the lowering or elimination of those factors that can disrupt the students' education, and that can ultimately result in their failure to achieve those educational aims they want.* Each institution must give some thought to the match between student needs and the supports the educational programme is willing to offer students. Post-secondary and higher educational institutions cannot ignore diversity in this regard. Diversity itself may suggest the needs of certain students or groups of students.

**The diverse role education serves in the modern lifespan: lifelong learning and continuing professional development**

Increasingly lifelong learning and education are becoming important to career relevance and success. The pace of career change in post-industrial market societies is tremendous, creating the need to upgrade core professional skills and to obtain knowledge, competencies and skills that allow for career mobility and ultimately career change. The turmoil and unpredictability of labour markets and corporate decisions require once-comfortable career professionals, managers and technicians to be wary of the 'one career, one employer' imperative that fitted previous generations so well. Career professionals who were once comfortable in their work situations may need to acquire new competencies to lead work groups, engage in research and development, and undertake new work roles, some of which did not even exist a few years ago. In this context, continuing, adult and professional education become more important for current workers than at any time in the past.

Retention here may come to mean not necessarily the acquisition of a degree but the completion of specific coursework, learning experiences or certificate course. The accountant who qualified 20 years ago may need to complete a certificate course in information systems management in order to oversee a new corporate financial network. An engineer may need to change from a manufacturing discipline to an environmental one while a social worker may require certification in geriatrics after years of practice in child welfare.

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Excerpted from *Keeping Students in Higher Education*

It is not and will not be unusual for professionals with degrees, post-graduate degrees and professional qualifications to seek out educational opportunities in technical schools, local colleges or post-secondary adult education courses. Many of these adult learners will be in career transition requiring specific and focused education for work and life roles that they now must execute with confidence and competence. Workers who find themselves with supervisory responsibilities, human resource professionals who need financial skills and technicians who require interpersonal skills come to these settings to obtain short-term education and training. Retention here means the completion of modularized education or a set of courses that prepare these students for the next steps in their lives and careers. Retention also means that students persist to gain the specific competencies they need now in their work lives and in their careers.

But education also fits into the lifespan of individuals in developing countries. New delivery systems for the teaching of literacy, core economic competencies and core academic skills may become part of a technical school's mission, which is as concerned with teaching the fundamentals as it is in granting two-year technical degrees. A particular technical school may sponsor an innovative curriculum supporting entrepreneurial skill development among people coping with poverty. The technical school awards a certificate that can in turn be transferred to a college or university. The certificate indicates that graduates fulfil requirements for core academic skills and core business competencies. Retention here means that the institution helps or enables those who enrol to complete the course and obtain the certificate.

Such training will become increasingly important over a person's lifespan. Someone working on his or her own entrepreneurial business venture may earn a focused and specific certificate. Another person may earn multiple modularized certificates, for example in car maintenance. A certificate for brake installation allows the student to obtain an immediate job while moving ahead to the next logical technical competence in the technical training and education course. The retention strategy may focus on the student's completion of enough certificates so that he or she eventually earns a two-year degree in the chosen technical area, which he or she has already worked in for some time.

In this situation, labour markets indicate viable directions to students, and training and educational curricula are flexible and adaptive enough to allow students a number of relevant options to choose from. However, the flexibility and adaptive capacities of curricula should not obscure the retention issues. Students can bring to the learning

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environment profound personal, social and cultural issues that can enhance, support and/or disrupt their persistence in the achievement of their educational aims. The essence of retention is to respond to these issues, so students can master the learning situation and proceed to fulfil those requirements that their educational aims dictate. The retention programmes and strategies of the future may need to be as flexible and adaptive as educational curricula.

**THE PSYCHOSOCIAL NATURE OF RETENTION**

So retention is not only a matter of finishing a degree. It is a matter of fulfilling students' educational aims that reflect their educational aspirations. Ultimately, these aims relate to students' lives and lifestyle, and how education fits into their life aspirations. It is the purpose of retention to assist students who require a support system to achieve their aims and achieve success in their roles as students. What do we mean by 'the psychosocial nature' of retention? The phrase refers to the identification, assessment and resolution of those issues that can disrupt student success within an academic course if left unresolved or unfulfilled or if left to operate without change or modification. These issues operate within the person and within the environment. We conceive of the *environment of retention* as quite broad. It includes the environment formed by the academic setting inclusive of expectations, standards, performance requirements, resources and opportunities an institution offers. The environment of retention also extends beyond the formal course of study and/or the institution to encapsulate the grater community and the availability or lack of resources through the community including tangible resources like work, housing, recreation, health care and transportation, and intangible resources like encouragement, affirmation and emotional support. It also incorporates the student's peer group and family situation, and the broader cultural milieu within which the student functions in everyday life, which can frame, define and value education or various aspects of it, and career or life outcomes.

The individual student also is a source of issues. These can include aspirations and personal goals, expectations, values, commitments, and strengths and needs as they relate to the choice of an educational direction. The substantive needs of a student are not merely educational or academic in nature but also involve other factors like mental health, finances and the availability of social support.

The psychosocial nature of retention suggests five co-ordinating principles:

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Excerpted from *Keeping Students in Higher Education*

1. Retention involves the interaction of the students' environment, the postsecondary or higher education institution and the substantive needs of students. An educational institution that helps students fulfil or resolve the needs and issues they face will facilitate educational persistence and will be effective in the production of retention.

2. Retention involves the identification of issues operating in the environments of students outside the educational or academic situation as well as those operating within.

3. Each student must identify those issues that are most salient in his or her environment or personal situation that can reduce persistence in a particular educational course or situation. The more disruptive these issues become the more likely it is that the student will not persist.

4. The personal strengths and assets of students and the strengths and assets of their environments can offset the negative influence of the issues they face, and facilitate the persistence of students in the educational course or situation.

5. The students who are at most risk are those who face a considerable number of issues, who do not have a great deal of support in their personal and academic environments, and who do not receive strong support by the educational institution.

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These principles suggest that retention is a purposeful psychosocial intervention undertaken by a sponsoring academic or educational programme to reduce, weaken or eliminate those factors that can threaten persistence toward educational aims and aspirations, and to increase supports that will enable students to overcome the barriers they face. The basic aspects of retention as a psychosocial intervention form a helping process that is designed to support the individual success of students whose educational persistence and subsequent retention may be in jeopardy or at risk.

Student retention will continue to be an issue for a society and its educational institutions in flux. In other words, students experience first-hand this changing world, and it makes an impact on them in their quest to achieve their educational aims and aspirations. But retention cannot be merely programmed. Students face different issues and experience them in different ways. These issues and their experience by students have different consequences for educational persistence and retention.

This means that a student-centred approach to retention and the persistence students need to achieve retention are very personal matters. A student-centred approach means that retention is primarily for students and not necessarily for the benefit of the institution, although it can create many institutional benefits. A post-secondary or higher educational institution personalizes the retention process by:

• *Taking seriously the issues students face* and helping them to form relationships with caring staff who can assist them to identify, frame and subsequently resolve these issues. This means that any retention process requires an institutional commitment of staff who are willing to establish strong relationships with students.

• *Recognizing that retention is a decision process.* Some students may fade out of education. They face very real issues, are unsuccessful in addressing these issues and make decisions over time that weaken their involvement in education.

Other students may face serious crises that push them out of educational involvement. A personalized approach to retention will reach out to students, help them to identify where they are at in the decision process and help them to resolve these decisions in a manner that is productive to them personally and educationally.

• *Offering a continuous programme of retention.* The institution recognizes that retention is a helping process that can exist over the lifespan of a student's career within an educational institution. Students can pick and choose their level of involvement in a retention effort. They should be able to phase out of the retention effort, and easily trigger a return if they feel there is a need. This means that students can go to a person seeking help when they have a setback, or when they face personal, educational or other issues that they feel they cannot handle on their own. They can then phase out of this encounter, but trigger involvement again if there is a need.

• *Framing retention as a helping process.* Ultimately, retention is a helping process in which relationship building is linked to individual strategies that the parties use to achieve a desired educational outcome. The key elements of the helping process are outlined in the box below.

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Excerpted from *Keeping Students in Higher Education*

1. Reaching out to students who have a need for retention support.

2. Forming strong, personal working relationships with these students that helps them to identify their aspirations and appraise their strengths and needs in the achievement of these aspirations.

3. Assessing what is going on, what strengths are operating, what issues are operating and what needs must be fulfilled.

4. Framing the retention objective and gaining commitment to it by both parties, as well as by key stakeholders in the educational and personal life of the student.

5. Identifying strategies and key action steps to achieve the retention objective and to produce an outcome; implementing and monitoring the retention strategies; modifying the strategies to ensure that students persist in their educational courses and realize retention, thereby enabling them to achieve their educational aims.

6. Involving key stakeholders in these action steps and strategies.

7. Taking action and revising strategies in the pursuit of the retention objective and outcome.

8. Achieving the objective, evaluating it and making key decisions about the continuation or redirection of the helping process.

9. Keeping the door open through follow-up, periodic contact and friendly visiting.

10. Assisting students to transition in their educational careers and endeavours.

**CONCLUSION AND GUIDELINES**

The sheer diversity of higher education today requires a student-centred approach to retention. New patterns of higher education and the social realities today's students face combine to demand more comprehensive approaches to retention rather than merely trying to keep students in higher education through narrow approaches to academic preparation and skill acquisition.

Contemporary retention efforts must go beyond an academic focus to address the personal, economic, cultural and career issues students face and must deal or cope with in order to be successful in higher education. The idea that students will enter higher education immediately after their secondary school education and persist for three or four years without interruption towards a degree no longer holds as the sole or primary approach to education. Educational institutions with an interest in retention must appreciate the diverse qualities of their actual and potential student bodies, and they must recognize the diverse aims students want education to fulfil.

In this chapter we have identified this diversity and illustrated how it can create the need for a dynamic retention effort and programme. We do not prescribe how an institution of higher or post-secondary education must respond to this diversity but we do highlight the importance of a student-centred approach.

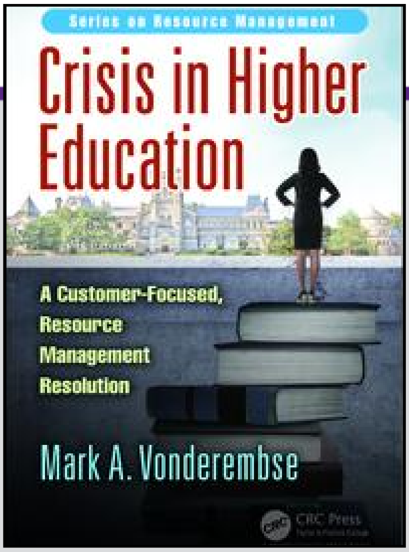
Retention is indeed a very personal matter for a student, and it requires a flexible, comprehensive and supportive approach that fits well with a student's needs in order to make the retention effort or programme of an educational institution both viable and effective. We must also recognize another important aspect of a retention effort. Retention is a helping process that is geared to the needs of a particular student. The essence of retention lies in the ability to offer a student centred helping process to each student with a desire or need for this kind of support. This student-centred helping process possesses the competence to deliver the five forms of support we identified in Chapter 1. Retention is a matter of matching the requisite forms of support to the needs of students. It involves offering students the emotional, informational, instrumental, material and/or identity support they require to master the academic expectations and requirements of the institution of higher or post-secondary education.

The educational institution's endorsement of and commitment to retention is vital to the success of any effort to keep students in higher education. The institution of higher or post-secondary education cannot merely pay lip service to the importance of retention. It requires a mission that highlights the importance of a student-centred approach to retaining students in higher education. The content of this mission is informed by the manner in which retention is practised (see the Introduction) and the student-centred qualities of retention (see Chapter 1).

CHAPTER

3

# BECOMING STUDENT CENTERED: THE RIGHT WAY




This chapter is excerpted from

Crisis in Higher Education: A Customer-Focused, Resource Management Resolution

by Mark A. Vonderembse.



Learn more

# BECOMING STUDENT-CENTERED: THE RIGHT WAY

Excerpted from *Crisis in Higher Education: A Customer-Focused Resource Management Solution*

Five decades ago, universities had not embraced the notion of being student friendly. Dormitories were best described as basic and cramped, food service was poor, registering for classes was an 8-hour ordeal, recreation centers were not available, and student services were inadequate and often unfriendly. Newly admitted students knew, or at least thought they knew, that universities had flunkout courses, which would separate the wheat from the chaff. The following story went around college campuses at the time, although there is no evidence that it actually happened. A university president began his (at the time nearly all university presidents were men) opening remarks at first-year student orientation. He said, “Look at the person to your immediate left and the person to your immediate right. Only one of you will graduate.” Universities were not welcoming places. As enrolment continued to grow for reasons discussed in Chapter 1, there seemed to be an endless supply of applicants. But, in the first half of the 1980s, the number of high school graduates began to decline as the last of the baby boomers graduated and children from the leading edge of the baby boomers, or the boomers’ echo, were in elementary and middle school. As a result, universities faced a shortage in their primary feedstock: fresh-faced high school graduates. After decades of growth, which covered up overspending and poor management, many universities had to figure out how to attract more students, cut cost, or do both. Elite universities only had to reach a bit deeper into their applicant pool to maintain enrolment, but universities with less stature faced declines.

In response, universities adopted student-centered learning, which is the use of varying pedagogies, modified assignments, and different academic support strategies to address the distinct learning needs, interests, and cultural backgrounds of individual students. In essence, this is customized learning and is consistent with service dominant logic as discussed is Chapter 5. Student-centered learning, which dates back to the 1930s, is a substantial departure from teacher-centered learning where the instructor asserts control over the material and determines the pedagogy.1 With teacher-centered learning, all students receive the same learning package. As the notion of student-centeredness was adopted to address enrollment concerns, it morphed into a student-first mentality across all aspects of student life, because it was not clear how to deliver customized education to thousands of students without busting the budget.

As a result, student-centered learning, the most important aspect of being student centered, was lost. In addition, becoming student centered caused universities to misjudge the needs of potential employers, who want highly capable graduates with

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up-to-date knowledge. When an intense focus on pleasing students and limited attention to potential employers are combined with an emphasis on retaining students, performance standards gradually eroded. Faculty members feel the pressure to lessen standards from students, who are pressed for time, and from administrators, who want higher retention rates. These tendencies are not counterbalanced by pressure from potential employers to maintain or increase standards. These factors also cover up a lack of preparation by many students.

Becoming student centered should be a positive experience because students get more respect, better treatment, and courteous, responsive, effective, and efficient services. Student services such as online registration and online financial aid make students' lives easier and may actually lower costs. Better facilities, such as dormitories and dining halls, and more amenities, such as student activities and legal services, have improved quality of life, but they have increased room and board costs as well as student activity fees. One irony is that some universities, which built these expensive dormitories, have vacant rooms, and they are requiring students who are unable to commute to live in campus housing. Being student centered seems to be in conflict with this requirement.

These points are related to becoming student centered and are discussed in the following sections.

1. *Cost impacts:* With respect to facilities and amenities: Has the pendulum swung too far? Are universities investing too much? Can student services be improved further while the cost of providing those services is reduced?

2. *Plans of study:* Being student centered means that students must have plans of study to identify what courses to take and when to take them in order to complete their degree on time and without paying for unneeded courses.

3. *Student-centered learning:* It is time to circle back and address this notion, which is designed to cope with the different ways students acquire knowledge. If learning can be tailored to match the needs of individual students, they can learn more in less time and use fewer resources, making education more efficient, thereby reducing costs. 4. *Student evaluations of teaching:* Being student centered has increased the incidence of student evaluations and given credence to their use in assessing faculty for contract renewal, promotion, and tenure. It seems reasonable and logical for students to have a role in

evaluating faculty teaching, but it must be done so that academic standards are maintained.

### 7.1 UNDERSTANDING THE COST IMPACTS OF BEING STUDENT-CENTERED

Construction on university campuses boomed, as the growth in demand for higher education combined with efforts to become student centered. Students who stepped on campuses in the late 1940s, the 1950s, the 1960s, and even the 1970s would find today's campuses unrecognizable. Although it is difficult to know whether spending on facilities and amenities has gone too far, there are prominent people who believe that it has. Robert Reich, former U.S. Secretary of Labor and Professor of Public Policy at the University of California at Berkeley, claims that universities are spending on unnecessary programs and campus perks often at the expense of hiring faculty. These facilities and amenities are very expensive, contribute to escalating costs, and have little to do with educating students. Some universities are showcasing their value through impressive dining halls, palatial new buildings, and fancy student unions, which have little to do with the quality of education.2 Some administrators defend the practice by claiming that facilities are often funded by major gifts from donors and do not consume tuition dollars or other operating funds.2 There are two rebuttals. Each new building must be heated, cleaned, and maintained, which adds to operating expenses. Second, it is possible, maybe even likely, that donors would be willing to contribute to scholarships, which helps students and universities, or to other worthy projects rather than to new buildings.

The first step toward a solution is to ask: Does the university need more new buildings? The answer may be no for several reasons.

1. Even if enrollment continues to grow, the trend toward distance learning, where students do not attend classes on campus, will continue. Fewer students on campus mean fewer dormitories, eating establishments, parking structures, and classrooms.

2. Some have asked whether universities should outsource student housing to private companies. These companies could manage existing dormitories and likely build new ones more cheaply than universities. Let these organizations invest the capital and take the risk of offering student housing, and allow universities to focus on education.

3. If universities are really student centered, they would not require students who are not

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Excerpted from *Crisis in Higher Education: A Customer-Focused Resource Management Solution*

within a reasonable commuting distance to live on campus.

4. If universities change pedagogy to achieve student-centered learning, the new methods may require less classroom time and more time on the Internet, which means fewer classrooms, more capable computer networks, and high-speed data delivery across multiple platforms.

5. Administration has grown rapidly, and it has placed a huge cost burden on universities.2 If and when this is addressed, there should be less demand for office space and parking garages.

The second step is to ask: If the university needs more buildings, how can they be designed and built to be functional, attractive, and cost less. At public universities, future construction must come under careful scrutiny by the university, state government, and the general public. This cannot be left to universities alone because senior leaders, especially presidents, like to point toward striking new buildings as major accomplishments that are part of their lasting legacy and a key factor in securing their next job. Not building or building only modestly is not a point of pride that attracts praise.

Amenities, like sports programs, student newspapers, clubs, and recreation centers, are paid for by student activity fees, which do not, at least in theory, support learning. Chapter 4 describes problems with the notification, collection, and use of fees. The following changes should be made.

1. Universities should adopt policies that student fees cannot, under any circumstances, be used for academic programs or academic related administrative purposes, including building or refurbishing classroom facilities, faculty offices, and administrative spaces.

2. Students should have the right to decide whether they pay student fees or not. If fees do not support learning, why must students pay them? If they do not pay the fees, they do not get the services. Students can make the decision to opt out for many reasons. Students may not have interest in sports, clubs, and recreation; they may prefer spending money on other forms of entertainment and exercise; or they may live at home and commute. Some students are married with children, work full-time, and are part-time students, and other students have jobs, study hard, and attend classes. Neither group has time to participate in these activities. Other students may enroll in distance learning

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classes and never or rarely step foot on campus.

3. Tuition dollars must be spent for academic purposes and for administration that is directly related to academics. This precludes universities from increasing tuition to cover non-academic amenities like sports programs and recreation centers.

4. All costs for learning, such as day-to-day student access to computers or library expenses, must be paid by tuition. When there are academic expenses for particular courses that compel an additional charge, such as laboratory courses requiring expensive equipment and supplies or design courses needing extraordinary computer access, these must be clearly designated as “tuition surcharges.” These exceptions should be rare and well documented by the institution.

Part of becoming student-centered is offering better services such as online registration and automated systems so students can easily monitor progress toward graduation. As universities seek to make these improvements, and they should, it is essential to use technology, lean thinking, and value stream mapping to design innovative systems that eliminate waste and use resources more efficiently. Too often, universities simply automate the current manual process, capturing the error and redundancies and not taking advantage of capabilities inherent in the technology. For more information on this, there are a few books that describe the application of lean thinking to universities, including W. K. Balzer (2010), *Lean Higher Education: Increasing the Value and Performance of University Processes* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press/Taylor & Francis Group).3

**7.2 PREPARING A PLAN OF STUDY**

A plan of study is a list of courses that students must complete as well as a timetable for completion, so students graduate in the shortest possible time and avoid paying for courses that are not needed for graduation. For a bachelor’s degree, the plan is an eight-semester schedule that students should follow. For students without prior coursework, this means finishing the degree in four years, so graduates can begin their careers as soon as possible. For transfer students, it is the shortest path to graduation. In effect, plans of study are contracts between students and the institution that place demands on the institution to offer courses in sufficient quantities and at the proper times so students are not “closed” out of classes and forced to wait for graduation. Plan of study software must have the ability to track progress toward graduation. Students must have fast and easy access so they can check and verify their progress as often as they like. This software would be linked to registration software and would warn students and their advisor, when students are (1) registering for a course that is not in the plan of study, (2) not registering for a course that is in the plan of study, and (3) registering for a course now that should be taken later. This provides students and advisors with sufficient time to discuss the schedule for the semester and to keep students on track for graduation. There are other circumstances that may require a change to the plan, such as illness that causes students not to complete courses. No matter the cause, a new plan of study is created with the intent of enabling students to complete the degree in as short a time as possible. All changes must be agreed to by the students.

**7.3 IMPLEMENTING STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING**

The heart of student-centeredness is creating pedagogies that are customized to meet the different learning strengths of individuals. A first reaction might be that customized learning is too expensive because faculty and students would have to work closely in one-on-one sessions or in small groups, much smaller than typical class sizes used at public universities today with 30, 40, 50, or 300 or 400 students. Using traditional pedagogies, such as lecture and discussion or case analysis, in small groups, even in groups as small as 10 or 15, would drive instructional costs at public universities "through the roof."1 The plan is to use advanced technology to develop customized learning so costs are low.

Experts in the field have identified the following seven learning styles. Understanding these styles may provide useful information about appropriate careers. For example, engineers often learn visually, logically, and physically, whereas psychologists may learn best verbally and socially.

1. *Verbal (Linguistic):* These learners like to read, write, and communicate verbally, and they learn best by saying, hearing, and seeing words.

2. *Visual (Spatial):* They are very good at working with colors and pictures and using the "mind's eye" to understand and resolve complex problems. They learn best when words are replaced with pictures and when colors are used to highlight important points.

3. *Logical (Mathematical):* These are analytical problem solvers who learn best by categorizing, classifying, and working with abstract patterns and relationships. A systems

perspective and thinking help them understand the big picture.

4. *Aural (Auditory-Musical):* They use sound, rhythm, and music to learn. They often learn best when reading or studying with music in the background.

5. *Physical (Kinesthetic):* Hands-on learning using physical objects suit these learners. They may also create and use drawings and diagrams to learn and explain ideas.

6. *Social (Interpersonal):* They prefer to learn in groups and with other people. They enjoy role playing and tackling group assignments.

7. *Solitary (Intrapersonal):* They prefer working alone. They are independent, pursue their own interests, and have a deep understanding of themselves. They do best in self-paced instruction and individualized projects.4,5

A review of these learning styles indicates that the distinctions among the seven types are not razor sharp. For example, both visual and physical learners prefer drawings and diagrams as learning tools, whereas social and physical learners benefit from role playing. Further, there is not a one-person to one-learning style relationship. People often learn well in more than one way, and they may use different learning styles when facing different topics and circumstances. Some people may find it easier to learn statistics using the logical learning style because it suits the topic better, but they may grasp philosophical concepts more effectively using the social learning style. It is important for students to experiment and understand what works best for them. Universities should provide a set of learning tools for each course that delivers knowledge using different methods, although it is possible that one tool could incorporate more than one learning style. Having several learning tools allows students to choose the ones that work best for them.

The following example illustrates how this might work for a basic course in statistics. This should be considered a first pass at designing a course to cope with different learning styles.

1. *Lecture:* It may be possible to offer this course without face-to-face lecture and discussion.

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2. *Reading materials:* Electronic reading materials or e-books are available that have text, diagrams, and charts, as well as example questions and problems, which students can read and follow. Collectively, universities are in a position to negotiate better prices with textbook publishers than students, especially for e-books. They can use their leverage to gain more content and features at a lower price.

3. *Electronic sample test questions:* Computer-based, conceptual questions are provided that students can respond to. The computer identifies correct and incorrect answers, and takes students to the point in the e-book where information about the question is found.

4. *Electronic sample test questions:* Computer-generated problems are provided for students to solve, and they know immediately whether the answer is right or wrong as well as get hints about the errors that were made. Students may work these problems repeatedly because the computer can generate new data. (E-books with these questions and problems capabilities are being developed by textbook providers.)

5. *Videos:* Video vignettes explain key concepts and work problems in a step-by-step manner, so students understand why they are doing something, how to do it, and what it means when they are done. The videos would be short, maybe 10 to 15 minutes, and focus on a topic. They could replace traditional lectures, and students could access them repeatedly.

6. *Written assignments:* Even courses like statistics should require some written communication. So assignments would include describing statistical concepts and application in written form as well as discussing and interpreting the numerical answers to problems. These assignments could be completed on a computer network, and students would receive immediate feedback.

7. *Instructors' duties:* Hold voluntary, weekly help sessions where students can raise question and get answers. Instructors are also available online to answer questions and chat with students.

8. *Working groups:* Groups of five or six students may be established so they can share knowledge and work together on concepts and problems. There would be opportunities for the group to query the instructor for help.

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There are three important outcomes to pursue when designing instructional packages.

1. *Enhance learning:* Students learn more in less time and with less effort, thus freeing time so they can take addition courses in a semester, work more hours, or participate in other activities.

2. *Reduce costs:* If the instructional packages are creative and thoughtful, universities can deliver a student-centered learning course at a lower cost than one offered in a traditional lecture mode. With this new approach, less tenured and professional faculty time is needed and much of the face-to-face as well as the Internet interactions can be done by instructors and lecturers, who earn substantially less.

3. *Effective design and implementation:* Tenured and professional faculty members design the learning materials. They also create and grade tests, taking this duty away from instructors and lecturers. Financial incentives could be given to instructors and lecturers based the number of students who meet all the learning objectives for the course, as determined by the final examination. Incentives can be given because the design of course content, test construction, and grading are not part of their responsibility, but good teaching and learning are.

One final point is that universities would have to make a more substantial investment in course development than they do currently. Now, faculty members spend time designing the curricula, picking a textbook and cases, and creating or selecting lecture materials such as PowerPoint slides and homework assignments. With videos, interactive learning systems, and other tools, someone has to take the time and invest in their development. This upfront cost should be recovered through instructional savings. This approach is consistent with the concept of economies of scale, which means investing in fixed cost so the variable cost of operating is reduced, thereby reducing total cost. Designing course materials to address different learning styles interacts with Chapter 10 on Redesigning Curriculum and Pedagogy, Chapter 12 on Reshaping Faculty's Role, and Chapter 13 on Creating High- Tech Learning Materials.

### 7.4 CHANGING THE WAY STUDENTS EVALUATE FACULTY

Chapter 4 describes the problem created when students evaluate faculty, especially instructional faculty. In summary, instructional faculty members are not protected by

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tenure and are evaluated for contract renewal based on teaching performance as assessed by students. As a result, they are susceptible to comments from students that a course is too difficult and/or covers too much material. Therefore, instructional faculty members are under pressure to cover less and reduce standards to appease students. Professional faculty members are far less susceptible to this pressure because they have decades of experience, which helps them understand what students should know and hold the line against this pressure.

The solution to the problem has three parts, and the first part is discussed in the prior section.

1. *Take instructional faculty out of the line of fire:* When instructors and lecturers have no control over course content and do not write or grade the test, they receive less pressure and fewer negative comments from students. Content and performance standards for courses are set by potential employers working with tenured and professional faculty.

2. *Measure teaching effectiveness by student performance:* Assessing the teaching effectiveness of instructional faculty is no longer done with student evaluations. Rather, it is accomplished by pretesting and posttesting each student. A subject matter pretest is given during the first class to determine the students' level of competence. The final examination measures what students know at the end, and the difference between the two is what the students have learned. Both the final exam, which is an absolute learning standard, and the difference between the two tests, which is a relative standard, are used to assess the teaching performance of instructional faculty. This approach is useful for tenured and professional faculty as well.

3. *Gather different student input:* Student evaluations are still used, but they no longer ask questions such as: How much have students learned? Was the faculty member a good teacher? Did the students like the faculty member? Asking most 18- to 22-year-old students about these issues presupposes that they have some idea of what they should learn, when in fact they have limited knowledge about what they need to know to compete for good jobs at graduation. The revised student evaluation gathers feedback on the following:

a. Student experiences, including what learning tools would help them learn faster and easier. This relates to student-centered learning and the seven learning styles, so the evaluation might ask if and how they used specific tools and were these effective.

b. Faculty performance, which should emphasize things students can readily and reliably assess. Were students treated courteously and respectfully? Did the instructor provide clear and prompt feedback on performance? Did the instructor arrive on time? Was the instructor well prepared? Students can provide meaningful feedback about treatment and process, and their answers can be part of the instructors' evaluation.

**7.5 DRIVING FORCES FOR CHANGE**

Some of the changes are within the control of universities, so government, students, parents, other family members, and friends should be providing the pressure. If universities want to attract more students, they must embrace all aspects of being student centered, including student-centered learning. Faculty members are key players in this change, so they must buy into and lead these efforts. Although this entails upfront investment, university leader who understand the value and potential costs savings will choose to move forward. Public universities, under pressure from government, students, and students' support groups, should work hard to improve student services and lower administrative costs. This creates better value for students, which leads to lower tuition costs and higher enrollment. University administrators and tenured faculty must work together to change how faculty are evaluated so instructional faculty feel less pressure to reduce course content and decrease learning standards.

Two parts of the solution require government to take the lead. Universities are likely to resist any attempt to make student fees optional. They may go along with the ideas that student fees can only be spent for nonacademic purposes and that funds cannot be comingled, but even these ideas are likely to meet resistance. Second, state governments provide funds to expand infrastructure and should press public universities to thoroughly examine their plans for new buildings to prevent overinvestment. As a last resort, states can decide to provide capital funds only for maintaining existing buildings.

**7.6 IMPACT OF BECOMING STUDENT-CENTERED ON HIGHER EDUCATION OUTCOMES**

Universities have been working to become student-centered for many years, and they have improved in some areas such as treating students with more respect and providing better services. But they have not reached the top of the mountain, which is finding ways to customize their pedagogies to cope with different learning styles and focusing on what

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may be the single biggest problem with higher education: rapidly rising costs. The following list examines how this element of the solution impacts the root causes, which are discussed in Chapter 4.

1. *Lack of understanding—Who is the customer? (root cause 1):* The essence of being student centered is to understand the needs of students, but it goes further to recognize that students are best served when universities create strong links with another of its customers, potential employers. Finding employment is a critical outcome that students want.

2. *Rise of the ruling class: Administration (root cause 3):* Becoming student centered also means providing students with the best value, so cutting administrative cost is important because it improves the value proposition.

3. *Limited productivity improvements for universities (root cause 4):* Changing the pedagogy to create an environment for student-centered learning offers a way to improve the productivity of faculty and lower instructional costs.

4. *Rapidly growing costs for books and supplies (root cause 5):* Studentcentered universities must work with textbook publishers to create new and innovative ways to learn while cutting costs. Universities are in a better position to negotiate prices with publishers than students.

5. *Funding finesse—Mixing fees and tuition (root cause 6):* Studentcentered learning means that students determine whether they pay fees or not.

6. *Eroding standards (root cause 8):* Student-centered learning requires universities to do what is best for students. To do this, universities must maintain standards so students are qualified for good jobs with organizations that hirer their graduates.

7. *Lack of student preparation (root cause 9):* An intense focus on satisfying students and declining enrollment creates an environment that covers up the lack of preparation. It is important to expose this problem and create a solution.

**7.7 SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

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Following is a list of the key recommendations that comprise this element of the solution.

1. Being student centered means that students get more respect, better treatment, and services that are courteous, responsive, effective, and efficient.

2. Building new dormitories must be carefully examined given the trend toward distance learning, and outsourcing the ownership, construction, and operation of dormitories must be considered.

3. Universities that make students a priority should not require them to live on campus.

4. Universities must examine future trends in higher education to determine how changes in the pedagogy, size of administration, and other factors impact the need to build new facilities.

5. After this careful examination, if universities need more buildings, they must find ways to design and build them to be functional, attractive, and cost less.

6. Student fees must be spent for nonacademic purposes and paying fees is at the option of the students. Funds for academic purposes and nonacademic purposes must not be comingled.

7. Students deserve fast and easy access to services. It is important to use technology, lean thinking, and value stream mapping to design and implement new and innovative processes.

8. Every student must have a plan of study that identifies which courses to take and when they should take them to graduate in the shortest possible time.

9. Universities must diversify their pedagogy to cope with the various learning styles of students. Efforts to do so should enhance learning, reduce costs, and change the roles and responsibilities of faculty. Universities must invest in the upfront cost to create this new pedagogy.

10. The process for students to evaluate faculty must change so instructional faculty are under less pressure to reduce course content and lower learning standards.

# BECOMING STUDENT-CENTERED: THE RIGHT WAY

Excerpted from *Crisis in Higher Education: A Customer-Focused Resource Management Solution*

a. Take instructional faculty out of the line of fire by making tenured and professional faculty responsible for course content, test creation, and grading.

b. Assess teaching effectiveness of contractual faculty and tenured faculty by evaluating them based on what students learned in their courses, using pretesting and posttesting.

c. Student evaluations assess the (1) availability and use of learning tools to help students learn faster and easier and (2) performance of faculty, which emphasize how students were treated.

CHAPTER

4

# PREPARE FOR CLASS, ATTEND, AND PARTICIPATE!

## INCENTIVES AND STUDENT SUCCESS IN COLLEGE

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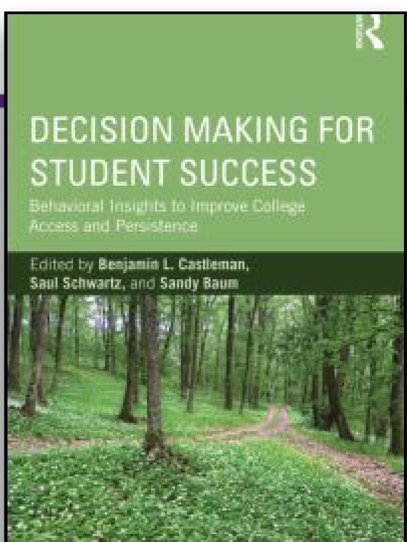



This chapter is excerpted from

*Decision Making for Student Success: Behavioral Insights to Improve College Access and Persistence*

by Benjamin L. Castleman, Saul Schwartz, Sandy Baum



Learn more

# PREPARE FOR CLASS, ATTEND AND PARTICIPATE!

## INCENTIVES AND STUDENT SUCCESS IN COLLEGE

Excerpted from *Decision Making for Student Success*

The dream of every caring teacher is that students will seek knowledge because they are curious and love learning for its own sake. But few people are so self-motivated and self-directed that, on their own, they will take the steps to achieve basic mastery of an academic discipline. Most of us need significant guidance and encouragement to identify and engage in all of the necessary tasks to achieve academic success, even if we are intrinsically motivated. Indeed, that direction and inspirational prodding is what a college, ideally, is supposed to provide.

In this chapter we use the tools and terminology of behavioral economics to examine strategies that can promote learning for students in college and increase the probability they earn a degree. By applying a behavioral lens to the task of improving college completion we are not attempting anything novel. It would be more accurate to say that we are returning to the very roots of the higher education enterprise and how it should ideally operate to support students in their pursuit of a degree.

**Motivations vs. Methods vs. Behaviors**

A college degree has become strongly associated with having a successful life, due largely to higher earnings and the ability of a college degree to open doors to a variety of occupations and careers. Many people who begin college say they want a college degree, yet a substantial share fail to engage in the behaviors necessary to achieve that goal. Why does this discrepancy exist? To examine that question, it is helpful to distinguish the ultimate goals people are trying to achieve from the route they are taking to achieve those goals, and to differentiate both of those from the behaviors that people actually display. Physical fitness offers a useful analogy, because like a college education it requires sustained work over a long time to achieve the reward. There are many reasons someone might want to be physically fit, like being more attractive, but here we assume that good health is the motivating factor.

Ultimate goal: Live a healthy lifestyle.

Route to the goal: Lose weight.

Behavior: Substitute fresh vegetables for potato chips.

Applying the same construct to higher education might produce something like the following:

Ultimate goal: A career with financial security.

Route to the goal: Earn a college degree.

Behavior: Read, write, go to class.

In both examples, the motivating goals are compelling while the behaviors themselves often face countervailing impulses. Even with the goals in mind, conflicting motivations can lead individuals to adopt behaviors that will lead them away from their goal: the weight loss goal being undermined by ice cream consumption and the goal of a college degree being undermined by social activities. Two of the major reasons that goals are undermined are lack of salience and present-biasedness.

***Lack of Salience***

Sometimes people do not engage in the behaviors that lead to their goals because they do not fully appreciate the association between their actions and their consequences (positive or negative). Posting calorie counts on menus can change people's food choices because it increases the *salience* of food choice: the connection between what they eat and their weight-loss goal. A college degree is salient because of its association with success later in life. Courses are salient because they are the building blocks to the degree. Within each course, instructors create even smaller salience units, the specific expectations of what students need to do to earn a specific grade or credit, such as points for completing assignments satisfactorily, passing exams, or participating in class. Students can calculate the effect that their performance on each component will have on course credit and, in the end, on graduating with the degree. The chain of salience, at least theoretically, reaches all the way from writing the term paper to earning a good salary (if that is the student's ultimate goal).

In behavioral economics terms, breaking down a salient goal into smaller units (courses, assignments, exams) is known as *narrow bracketing*. When the action steps are narrowed and individually rewarded, even small incentives can be powerful motivators (Read et al., 1999). Telling a child that eating his spinach will make him strong is rarely the effective motivator we hope for, even if the child has a Superman obsession. But a mere nickel can be enough to incentivize children to eat their vegetables at lunch (Just & Price, 2013). Adults in the workplace setting are constantly subjected to employers' efforts to incentivize behavior using money and other types of rewards (see Chapter 2 in this volume). Popular video games like Farmville use points to promote game-based behaviors in the same way that grades and credits in college are intended to incentivize learning-related behaviors.

The idea of attaching monetary rewards to behavior can spark worries that extrinsic rewards might crowd out intrinsic motivation. The concern may be misplaced, however: course credits and grades themselves are extrinsic rewards, designed to manipulate behavior that is, presumably, inadequately incentivized through intrinsic motivation alone. Furthermore, extrinsic rewards can help to introduce people to behaviors without undermining their potential willingness to later continue the activities without the incentive, as shown in studies involving exercise (Royer, Stehr, & Sydnor, 2012), eating fruits and vegetables (Just & Price, 2013), and performance on reading and math tests (Levitt et al., 2012). Indeed, a good college education ideally transforms someone who starts out wanting a piece of paper (the degree) or a salary into someone who is a self-motivated lifelong learner, creating, leading, and learning out of curiosity and personal commitment. The salience of tasks can be influenced by the way they are presented, or *framed*, such as calling an assignment a "requirement" versus "extra credit." Reframing a task as allowing a student to avoid a loss rather than leading to a potential gain can increase its power to affect behavior. [1] For example, the best golfers in the world, even Tiger Woods in his prime, were more likely to make a putt if they were putting for par than if they were putting for birdie (Pope & Schweitzer, 2011). If they missed their birdie putt they could settle for a par—the salient reference point for the hole. But if they missed their par putt they got a dreaded bogey. In higher education, an analogy could be multi-year scholarships which some students are eligible to earn. However, these scholarships can be lost by failing to meet set requirements. Loss aversion implies that students would be more likely to meet the set requirements to retain their current scholarship than to meet the same requirements to earn a new scholarship. As individuals are averse to losing what they already have or perceive that they have, actions can be taken to encourage students to adopt the behaviors that lead to college success.

***Present-Biasedness***

Many of the actions necessary to earn a college degree require sacrifices now in exchange for expected benefits in the future. Bracketing choices, framing them creatively, and attaching rewards all help to counteract the human tendency to be biased in favor of the present: wanting to do what is best for the long term but in the moment focusing on the short term (Downs & Loewenstein, 2011).

Many of us have had this feeling: *I want to lose weight soon, but I want the cookie now*. Both are true and legitimate desires, but the reward from losing weight is in the future, while the scrumptiousness of the cookie is immediate. So the cookie is eaten, and the weight-loss goal is pushed (again, and again) into the future. Taking advantage of people's present-biasedness can be a profitable business strategy. Before consumer protection laws curbed the practice, gyms would charge a large fee for a long-term membership that seemed reasonable on a peruse basis to consumers who were eager to commit to frequent exercise. But of course the buyers were vastly over-estimating their likelihood of actually going to the gym. Using this strategy, the gym could sell far more memberships than would fi t in the facility because they knew that most of the people were fooling themselves when they bought the membership. The gyms had no financial incentive to implement strategies to get people to actually *use* the gym. Much the opposite: it was best if members stayed away, because more memberships could be sold. And the buyers couldn't really complain, since after all their own laziness could be blamed for failing to make use of the membership they had purchased (DellaVigna & Malmendier, 2006).

Of course, even *with* the specific commitment to a course, present-bias can undermine success. For example, as a student selects and enrolls in classes she might say to herself, *I am going to dedicate myself to being an exemplary student this term. I will sign up for that class that meets at 8:00 in the morning.* Her determination is strong and she is pleased that the schedule fits her other commitments and will provide her with more flexible time each afternoon. However, during the second week in school when her alarm sounds to wake her with just enough time to get ready for that 8 o'clock class, she is faced with a new decision: Should I stay or should I go? She knows she should attend class—she is the same person who enrolled in the class—but she now faces a conflict between the long-term desire to succeed academically and the short-term impulse to sleep. Present-biasedness gets in the way of her goal of a college degree.

In the college context, one strategy for addressing bias towards the present is to ask students to make a *specific commitment* towards achieving a longer-term goal. A scheduled "course" is essentially that: a construct to get students to engage in tasks that lead to the credit towards graduation. By signing up for a course, a student is telling the college: *For the next 15 weeks, I will show up, prepared for class, every Tuesday and Thursday at 10 a.m.* Much of the excitement about online education fails to appreciate the importance of time-and-place commitments to battling the human tendency toward procrastination. It may seem like a good idea to let students sign up for online courses in which they can watch lectures and do assignments "at their own pace." However, without the specific up-front commitment, it becomes extremely difficult for people to battle the short-term desires to do something else. Life gets filled up with other tasks, to the point that it is never "convenient" to actually perform the learning tasks necessary to complete the wonderfully convenient online course.

Our discussion of incentives and student behavior should not be interpreted as placing all of the blame on students and their cognitive biases for failing to complete college. At most, the ideas we lay out should be seen as adjustments worth trying in the context of broader efforts to improve students' experiences and achievement in higher education through advising, creative scheduling, improved teaching, engaging extracurricular activities, and supportive peer groups.

**Student Behaviors That Matter**

When faced with the college dropout problem, policy makers and college leaders frequently undertake efforts to increase the salience of graduation as a goal. They launch information campaigns designed to remind students of the career and salary benefits of having the degree, for example. However, trying to make an already-salient motive more salient is not likely to make much difference.

# PREPARE FOR CLASS, ATTEND AND PARTICIPATE!

## INCENTIVES AND STUDENT SUCCESS IN COLLEGE

Excerpted from *Decision Making for Student Success*

Students have chosen to enroll because of the expected career and salary benefits of having a degree, so the general incentive to enroll in courses and do assignments is already there. Trying to make graduation more salient is like telling someone who already has a gym membership that they need to work on getting physically fit. They already know that.

Instead of trying to increase students' desire for the degree, interventions need to focus on changing the near-term behaviors that will help the student make progress toward the degree. Just as the person who wants to lose weight needs help eating right and exercising, college students can benefit from interventions that prompt them to engage in the specific actions that contribute to learning. Rather than focus on the motivation that caused them to set their goal, strategies should target the *behaviors* that lead to achieving the goal that they have already set. The oft-cited examples of successful interventions in behavioral economics involve relatively simple, measurable actions and outcomes: increasing savings by making enrollment in a 401K the default; reducing the spread of germs by washing hands; improving health by eating fruit or by exercising regularly. To make use the insights of behavioral economics requires first identifying the behaviors that contribute to earning a degree, something that is far more complicated than preventing infection or boosting assets. Analyzing 57 different measured student activities, Astin (1993) identified those that were associated with retention or degree attainment, after adjusting for student characteristics. They include:

**Factors that Are Positively Related to Student Success**

Hours spent studying or doing homework

Working on an independent research project

Giving class presentations

Taking essay exams

Interacting with faculty

Hours spent attending classes or labs

# PREPARE FOR CLASS, ATTEND AND PARTICIPATE!

## INCENTIVES AND STUDENT SUCCESS IN COLLEGE

Excerpted from *Decision Making for Student Success*

Participation in internship programs

Participation in intramural sports

Working part-time on campus

Participating in volunteer work

Alcohol consumption (see Note 4)

**Factors that Are Negatively Related to Student Success**

Working at a full-time job

Working part-time off campus

Hours spent watching television

Hours spent commuting to campus

Strategies from behavioral economics could be applied to any of the identified behaviors. We focus below on three behaviors that are particularly closely associated with learning in the traditional, classroom-based college: studying (doing assignments and otherwise coming to class well-prepared), attending class, and participating in class.

***Studying***

Hours spent studying was identified by Astin (1993) as having a particularly strong positive association with student success: "the most basic form of academic involvement—studying and doing homework—has stronger and more widespread positive effects than almost any other involvement measure or environmental measure." Studying not only contributes to retention and completion, students learn more when they dedicate more time to a given task (Frederick & Walberg, 1980). Students who spend more time doing homework get higher scores on exams and are more likely to get A's and B's (Grodner & Rupp, 2011). One study found that completing extra homework is more strongly related with students' performance than other measures, such as class size (Eren & Henderson, 2008). Despite the importance of studying, many students fail to put sufficient time into preparing for class and completing assignments. Some evidence indicates that the time students spend studying has dropped dramatically over the past few decades (Babcock & Marks, 2010). Today, the average college student spends less time *in class and studying* than a high school student spends *in class* without including homework. Experiments can be designed to encourage students to spend more time learning outside of the classroom, but there is a bit of chicken or egg problem that must be considered. For students to spend time on assignments that take serious time and effort, they need assignments that take serious time and effort. For faculty to make those assignments, they need to believe that the students will be ready and willing to do the work.

***Attending***

In addition to studying and completing assignments, going to class is a strong predictor of student success. As obvious as it may seem that students should go to class, skipping out is surprisingly common in many colleges. A survey conducted at three different types of institutions to measure absenteeism rates during a "typical" week of school found that 34 percent of students were absent at a medium-sized private university, 40 percent at a large public university, and 23 percent at a small liberal arts college (Romer, 1993). A survey at another university found that absenteeism averaged 20.7 percent and increased as the semester progressed (Marburger, 2001).

The evidence suggests that showing up to class does correlate with higher grades. A meta-analysis indicates that class attendance is also a very strong predictor of college grades even more so than scores on standardized admissions tests such as the SAT (Credé et al., 2010). One study attempted to quantify the effects of student absenteeism on performance by investigating the relationship between absenteeism and performance in an introductory economics class. The course was structured with three non-cumulative exams; each exam question was connected to the class period when the topic was covered. Students who were absent during the relevant class session were 14 percent more likely to get the corresponding questions wrong on the first two midterms and 7 percent more likely on the final (Marbuger, 2001). Overall, if students never had missed a class, their grade would have been slightly more than a quarter of a letter grade higher. While this study does not control for student characteristics, studies that do include student characteristics (i.e., prior GPA, gender, major, homework completion) find similar results (Romer, 1993; Dobkin, Gil, & Marion, 2010). Absenteeism doesn't only affect the student who misses class. There is also suggestive evidence indicating that absenteeism of classmates can negatively affect the performance of other students within a course. Collaborative learning—involving students in team or group activities and discussions—is a common and effective teaching strategy. Koppenhaver (2006) finds that students who had team members absent from class performed worse on homework assignments and on exams. Therefore, increasing attendance can benefit not only the students who weren't coming to class but also other students in the course.

The decision by a student to attend class is often hampered by the lack of salience and of immediate rewards to attending class. Consider for example a student who attends class wherein an instructor lectures from presentation slides drawn directly from the textbook. The benefit of actually attending class might not be apparent as the student could get the same information from reading the book and looking at lecture slides posted on a course website. Additionally, if there is no assignment due, no quiz, no exam in class, the student receives no immediate benefit, or at least no immediate reward, for attending. Even if there are salient and immediate benefits from attending class, a present-biased student may face more compelling alternatives in the present moment that preclude class attendance. Consider a student who, the night before class, is invited to a social activity. The student knows that this activity may extend into the late hours of the night, thus making it more challenging to wake up for the 8 a.m. class. What should the student do? He knows the importance of going to class as that will lead to better grades, but the benefits of a night out are so immediate that any benefit in the future, even the next morning, are soon dismissed. Thus the student stays out late and doesn't wake up in time to attend class.

***Participating***

Getting students to class is not sufficient if they are not engaged once they are there. Student participation is such a core element of effective college pedagogy that the U.S. Department of Education commissioned a study in 1984 entitled "Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education" (National Institute of Education, 1984). Subsequent studies have confirmed that "active learning" in the classroom improves student performance (Tinto, 1987; Nunn, 1996; Tinto, 1997; Billings & Hallstead, 2009). Efforts to improve teaching in college continue to promote the central importance of active participation by students in class. For example, the 2013 standards of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business state that course curricula will "facilitate and encourage active student engagement in learning" and "facilitate and encourage frequent student-student and student-faculty interaction designed to achieve learning goals" (AACSB, 2013). Yet often students find themselves in class with no apparent reason to do anything more than just sit there. There seems to be a disconnect from their participation in class to subsequent performance in class and progress toward a college degree.

What are the obstacles that impede students from active learning?[2] First, even in an environment conducive to active learning, students may resist active engagement, preferring a passive approach more akin to the traditional college class with a professor speaking and students taking notes: the "sage on the stage." These students feel they are learning, even though they are passive and would learn more if they were engaged in active learning (Benware & Deci, 1984). If they are interested and are learning, students may not recognize the need to learn *better* , especially if the current learning method meets their expectations for a college class. Instructors, meanwhile, may lack the skills to effectively draw these students out.

Second, in large classes it is simply not feasible for every student to participate regularly by asking a question or making a comment. Students recognize this and decide to let others raise their hands to respond to or ask questions. Third, research suggests that the dominant reason students do not proactively participate in class is that they lack the confidence to do so (Fassinger, 1995), and are particularly worried about peer approval (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Saying something they worry may be unintelligible in front of their peers, not communicating their ideas clearly, or even simply having to speak in front of others makes many students nervous. These studies find that higher levels of student preparation can improve confidence. However, even with proper preparation students may still choose not to participate because they perceive the risks of embarrassment outweigh the expected benefits.

**Strategies and Incentives to Increase Studying, Attendance, and Participation**

Systematic efforts to improve instruction are too rare in our colleges and universities (Bok, 2006). Our intent in suggesting specific interventions is to provide some initial ideas for consideration in the context of more comprehensive efforts to analyze student progress and identify strategies for improvement both inside and outside of the classroom. We discuss this important context more in the final section.

***Strategies Directly Connected to Credit and Grades***

Grades and course credit are behavioral devices invented as tools to send signals to students about what is important. If students are failing to engage in an important behavior, the first question should be whether the behavior should be linked directly, or more effectively, with a grade.

**Assign homework and give credit** : Assigning homework makes studying salient: effort spent out of class directly relates to overall performance in the course. Assigning the homework on a regular basis is a way to take the material that students are expected to learn and to narrowly bracket each task. Further, providing credit for the assignment provides immediate rewards (or penalties) if assignments are done correctly (or not). These immediate rewards can be used as short-term benchmarks towards a long-term goal (i.e., an exam), addressing the present-biasedness that students face.

A wrinkle that can be applied to assigning homework and providing credit is how the assessment of homework assignments is framed. Consider the following examples. First, “For each assignment completed, you will earn 5 percent towards your final grade.” Second example, “For each assignment not turned in completed, you will lose 5 percent from your total grade. Thus missing just two assignments will lower your overall score by one letter grade.” Both examples provide the same credit for completing assignments, but the second scenario frames it in such a way that the consequences of missing assignments are more salient. Further, it frames the assignments in such a way that not completing the assignment will cause the student to lose rather than gain credit. Individuals have a greater response to losing something they already have than gaining something new, so this simple twist in how the assignments are framed can have positive impacts on getting students to complete assignments.

While providing students with regular, graded assignments may lead to more time studying and engaging with class materials, one survey showed that almost one-third of courses do not provide credit for the completion of homework assignments (Grodner & Rupp, 2011). Why don't more courses require regular homework assignments? One of the primary limitations may be the time instructors have to invest in grading these assignments. Two potential strategies are: (1) assign homework but grade only completion (5 points for completing it, 0 if not). Then provide solutions for students to grade themselves. (2) Assign and collect regular homework assignments but only grade a random subset or assign and collect each homework assignment and grade only a subset of the questions. In both of these ways, students see the salient benefit from studying outside of class and are given immediate rewards for doing so, but the time required for grading is reduced.

**Lost credit for non-attendance** .[3] To promote more regular attendance in class, instructors can deduct credit from students for each class they miss or for missing a predetermined number of sessions. Many students dislike policies requiring attendance, but variations of this can be implemented. For example, Baylor University mandates that "a student must attend at least 75 percent of all scheduled class meetings. Any student who does not meet this minimal standard will automatically receive a grade of 'F' in the course" (Baylor, 2011). Eastern Florida State College (EFSC) requires students to attend 85 percent of classes to receive credit (EFSC, 2014). Lafayette College allows instructors to refer students who miss an excessive number of classes (as determined by the course syllabus) to the dean for a review assessment of the "student's commitment to the class" (Lafayette, n.d.).

Dobkin et al. (2010) demonstrated the effectiveness of a mandatory attendance rule implemented in the middle of the term for a subset of students: those who scored below the median on the midterm exam. Using a regression discontinuity

approach (which compares students just below the median to students just above the median) the study shows that attendance increased by a whopping 28 percentage points as a result of making attendance mandatory for students who scored just below the median, and scores on the final exam increased significantly.
**Credit for participation** : Making class participation a part of the course grade has been shown to increase participation in class. In fact, multiple studies suggest that the level of participation is proportional to the amount it counts toward the final grade in the course (Berdine, 1986; Smith, 1992). If when students look at the syllabus they can see exactly how participation affects their grade, participation becomes more salient.

**Credit for written comment or question** : Students could be provided credit for turning in a question or comment written on a provided index card, or in an online forum. Foster et al. (2009) used this method to record participation in their study. This may be especially effective in large classes where there may not be time for every student to participate in class. It may also benefit small classes by encouraging students to prepare their comments or questions before vocalizing them. During class the instructor might ask for questions and students who have already written something may feel more confident about speaking up. Online discussion groups have been shown to be effective in improving student performance in college courses (Cheng et al., 2011). Students could be rewarded for posing questions or discussion topics on the forum, and provided with extra rewards for the types of interactions that help to connect discussion threads and deepen learning for the group. Rewards can be structured to provide a large reward to encourage first-time participants and then provide smaller rewards for continued participation.

***Strategies Indirectly Linked to Credit and Grades***

It is not always necessary to micromanage student behavior by formally offering class credit. There are strategies that may be able to achieve similar results.

**Social priming** : The stereotype of the student who answers questions in class is the overachieving student in the front two rows who raises her hand at every opportunity possible. Or there is the student who asks a stupid question that causes everybody to laugh. These stereotypes are examples of descriptive norms—perceptions of behaviors that individuals perform. An instructor can provide a prime to modify this perception (Cialdini, 2003). An example of this kind of prime is a statement like, "students who ask questions are the ones who do the best on the exam." The statement gives insight that those who ask questions do better and students are asking questions during class and not those that fi t the stereotypes. Another example is, "the best students in past semesters are those who participate in our small group discussions." Seeing others participate in group discussions can then help a student who wants to be one of the best students to participate in the class activity.

Along with priming with descriptive norms, a prime can be given to inform on injunctive norms. Injunctive norms "involve perceptions of which behaviors are typically approved or disapproved" (Cialdini, 2003). For example, "students who fail this course are those who come to class and use their cell phones instead of engaging in the lecture." While this kind of statement is directed towards disapproved behavior, it also introduces a caution on the hazards of priming. Students may hear the phrase "use their cell phones" and might perceive this as a descriptive norm—other students use cell phones in class—and adopt the undesired behavior. Caution is warranted when using primes to describe norms. Just as priming can be used to affect attendance, it can also be used as a strategy aimed at increasing time that students spend studying. For example, the prime given can be directed at students who desire to do well in the course. The instructor can make a statement like, "Students with a schedule similar to yours set aside significant amounts of time to study outside of class." Or, "Those who get A's and B's set aside 2–3 hours for every hour they are in class." These statements describes a norm that students spend time outside of class studying, but also establishes an injunctive norm that 2–3 hours is required to earn an A or B.

**Exam prep in class** : Research indicates that attendance in class spikes the days before a midterm or final exam (Romer, 1993). One way to make the benefits of attending class more salient for students is to be more explicit about exam preparation being a part of every class throughout the semester rather than on a specific day before the exam. Students may be more motivated to attend class when they know material on an exam will be discussed. Using phrases like, "this would be a good test question" or "this might be something you will see on the midterm" may help make the benefits of attending class more salient for students. Doing this on a daily basis makes each class period provide a well-defined benefit for the students, preparation for an exam.

**Quizzes** : Many instructors already provide rewards for students who show up to class. One of the more common rewards used for attendance is the use of pop quizzes. Unannounced quizzes can increase attendance in classes (Wilder, Flood, & Stromsnes, 2001). Frequent unannounced quizzes for extra credit may be particularly effective (Thorne, 2000). Similar quizzes worth minimal class credit have also been shown to increase student motivation to attend class (Kouyoumdjian, 2004). These studies indicate that for quizzes to be effective in encouraging attendance they should be frequent and unannounced, but need not be worth a significant number of points.

***Aiding and Prompting Strategies***

Another type of strategy to influence behavior is to create the educational equivalent of tying a string around your finger or leaving a note on the refrigerator.
**Peer nudges:** The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga has implemented a Freshmen Academic Success Tracking program (FAST) to make the benefits of attending class more salient. The FAST program identifies students who miss two or more classes in a term and reaches out to "gently nudge them back on course." The program has peers talk with students face-to-face, explaining the "connection between attending class and academic success." Introduction of the program was associated with the highest ever recorded average freshmen GPA and a fall-to-spring retention increase of seven percent (McClane, 2009).

**Distraction limit** : Even when students sit down to study or work on assignments, they can often be easily distracted by the electronic addiction: updating your social media page, checking the score of the game, finding out if Kevin Bacon really was in that movie, or even reading the news. These can all distract students from effectively studying. In an intervention to keep students on task, Patterson (2014) utilizes software where students pre-commit to the amount of "distraction" time when studying for an online course. Prior to beginning an assignment, the student determines the amount of distraction time available, e.g., 30 minutes. As students leave the course website for distraction time, once the time limit is reached, they receive a reminder of their commitment and then all other websites are blocked until the assignment is finished. Students can provide a reason and unblock websites, but must do so on a site-by-site basis. Using a pre-commitment device like this can help overcome time-inconsistent preferences and help students stay actively engaged in studying.

**Note cards** : In large classes, expecting each student to participate may simply be infeasible and impractical. So rather than have students participate vocally, note cards can be used instead (or electronic equivalents). Students can participate in class by putting a comment or question on a note card and handing the note card in. Note cards can be turned in for credit or they can be used as entries into a lottery drawing, with each note card serving as an entry. At the end of class, the instructor pulls one note card at random and the winner receives a reward. The use of a daily note card then further highlights how participation affects grades by narrowly bracketing and rewarding the note card as a form of class participation. This method provides a way for students to participate without having to bear the costs of how they are perceived by their peers. It allows them time to formulate their thoughts and communicate them in a non-threatening way instead of being called upon in front of the entire class. It also is a method that can be used in large classrooms, where time does not make it feasible for every student to participate.

Other variants can be added to reward active engagement in learning. When a card is drawn there can be a quality control measure to validate the note card as a winner (e.g., it must answer the question or provide a contribution to the discussion). Furthermore, note cards can be collected more than once per class period to ensure that students stay actively engaged the whole class period.

***Using Monetary Rewards***

There can sometimes be a negative reaction to the idea of using money to influence school behaviors. While the concerns should not be completely dismissed, it is important to recognize that monetary rewards already play a major role in higher education: for example, students are offered scholarships or discounts based on grades and test scores (sometimes linked to studying particular topics), or they receive greater subsidies for enrolling full-time, enrolling immediately after high school graduation, or for enrolling in their home state. The money is already linked to choices and behaviors. The strategies we describe are simply more specific to key behaviors.

**Study-time wage** : Providing a set location for students to study allows them to work on assignments individually or in groups as needed. One of the reasons students may fail to finish homework is that they have job responsibilities in addition to the courses in which they enroll. In order for financial incentives to induce the desired behavior, it may be necessary for them to be substantial enough (to account for opportunity cost) and more certain (salient) than, say, the higher future earnings that may come after graduating. This could be achieved by paying for the time spent in a study area or academic support center as if it were an hourly wage. (The rate need not necessarily be as a high as a wage since there are benefits to studying beyond the payment).

**Reward for keeping a study log** : Sometimes just by keeping track of something, people are more attentive to it. Students can be rewarded for keeping a study log by, for example, making it a requirement of scholarship programs. It could be based on time and subject, or could ask for a brief reflection on the value of the activity. The information could be used by administrators or scholarship programs to identify the student's needs and ways the institution and instructors could better support students.

**Pay for attendance**: Financial aid and other subsidies (such as in-state tuition) are provided based on the assumption that a student actually goes to college. One way to make the benefits of attending class more salient as well as immediate would be to condition a payment or financial aid on attendance. By having students "earn" their subsidy for each class attended, or by reaching attendance milestones, the importance of showing up is made more salient. Conditioning aid on attendance may well be too high stakes, with potential unintended consequences. A different approach would be to offer small rewards, either directly or through a lottery for attending class. A lottery can be more cost-effective than directly paying students because individuals are not very good at assessing low probabilities, imagining that very low probabilities are more likely than they actually are (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Routinely, individuals overestimate the value of the reward. Students are no different. Consider the two scenarios in a class with 100 students. Scenario 1: each day you come to class you earn 25 cents. Scenario 2: each day you come to class there will be a lottery where the winner will earn $10 in cash. Which would you choose? The value of the prize in the first scenario is known with certainty, 25 cents. The second scenario is based on the probability of winning. Assuming that all 100 students are in class, there is a 1/100 chance of winning $10, or if you multiply those numbers together, your expected winning each day is 10 cents. Clearly not as good as 25 cents, but many choose the latter because they overestimate the probability that they will be that winner. As a result, each student could get a lottery entry for every class attended (or some variant of class attendance) as an immediate salient reward for attending class.

**Multiple Motivations and Complex Causation**

While students may *enter* college because they know it's good to have a degree, they may *stay* in part because they like the people they are spending time with and they feel good about themselves. If they feel disconnected socially, they are more likely to leave.[4] The motivations that can influence what students do and don't do in college are complicated, certainly at least as challenging and nuanced as this summary of the complex and highly individualistic psychology of motivation in the workplace:

> [P]eople will be better motivated if . . . incentive schemes are designed by making use of their understood needs and wants; the rewards are linked to efforts; the performance goal is challenging and individuals accept and are committed to it; the rewards are perceived to be equitable; people feel confident they can perform better; the incentive schemes are in line with both expectations and the individual's goals and values; the incentive scheme design takes into consideration outcome uncertainty that may be unrelated to the effort contribution; and a model of positive leadership can be provided in the process of performance.
> *(Liu and Mills, 2007)*

While present-biasedness and the inadequate salience of particular tasks are worthy of attention, one hazard of an overly myopic approach would be to blame students for what are actually failures of a college. For example, once students start college, they learn more about the amount of time and effort they need to commit in order to pass, or to earn high grades. They may begin to doubt their own abilities, or to recalculate their initial thoughts about the costs and benefits of college, which may lead them to drop out. Is the decision to drop out, after recalculating based on better information, a "rational" decision that should be accepted? The question itself ignores the responsibility of the college and its faculty to pay attention to the more nuanced student motivations, including confidence and self-esteem. Effective instructors help students feel like they are making real progress, from wherever they are starting. Interpersonal strategies tied to specific assignments can be more effective than mass implementation of external incentives. For example, an instructor may tell a student that his ideas matter and he would really like him to speak up more in class discussions. If that doesn't work because the student is nervous, the instructor might help the student prepare before class by telling him what he will call on him to discuss, or having him write down some thoughts. The way an instructor manages student participation can serve as a promotion or deterrent to future participation.[5]

Effective instructors—those who simultaneously inspire, challenge, and support students—contribute to higher rates of attendance.[6] While strategies like smaller class sizes do not guarantee better, more interactive and personalized learning, they do make them more likely and more possible, and have been shown to decrease absenteeism (Devadoss & Foltz, 1996; Romer, 1993). Further, it should be no surprise that colleges with higher graduation rates tend to have built a lot of social and academic supports that surround students.

The behavioral strategies we have laid out are best employed in the context of efforts to consider the broad array of factors that motivate students to engage and learn in college. Encouraging students to study more, attend class, and participate more actively have been and will continue to be part and parcel of efforts to improve instruction and the overall design of the college experience. The concrete and psychologically-informed approaches we highlight can be important elements of faculty and administrators' ongoing efforts to provide an enriching education for all students.

**Notes**

1. Loss aversion is sometimes referred to as the "endowment effect"—the tendency to fight harder to keep what you feel you have rather than to gain the same item. For example, most people will demand more to give up their concert tickets than they

would be willing to pay in the first place.

2. For ease of measurement, all of the studies cited below define “active” engagement as whether a student vocally participates in class—that is, asks a question or makes a comment. Some give credit for participating once, while others measure intensity by considering the number of times a student participated. Since there is evidence that grading based on participation can lead to discussions dominated by a small number of students (Michael, 2006), it may be useful to base incentives on participating at least once. Over longer periods, however, encouraging more intensive involvement may be the better approach.

3. Keeping track of attendance might seem tedious, especially if the instructor is responsible for marking and tracking the attendance of each student. Technology provides mediums which allows attendance to be recorded in the largest of classes with little to no instructor involvement. One example are clicker devices—specific devices that a student purchases that link a given student to the clicker and the class. Other examples can rely on students using their own phones or mobile devices. There are many websites and other software which allows students to link their cell phone number to their roster id in a given class. So attendance can be monitored by simply writing a number of the board and asking students to text or enter that number using their phone.

4. Careful readers may have noticed a curious item on the list of statistically-significant correlates of student success on pages [128–129]: alcohol consumption is positively associated with completing a college degree. While the correlation does not prove causation (perhaps those who are already inclined to drink are also more academically committed), there is some logic to the idea that drinking does play a role. A logical explanation for the positive association of alcohol use with college completion is that it plays a role in social bonding. One downside among many is that alcohol consumption is negatively correlated with students’ grades.

5. Loftin, Davis, and Hartin (2010) discuss specific actions of faculty during class which impede students from participating. These include both verbal and nonverbal actions: ridiculing or disregarding student comments, not providing adequate time for responses or interjections, answering questions with questions, negative body language, and facially expressing displeasure. Students participate more if the instructor moves around

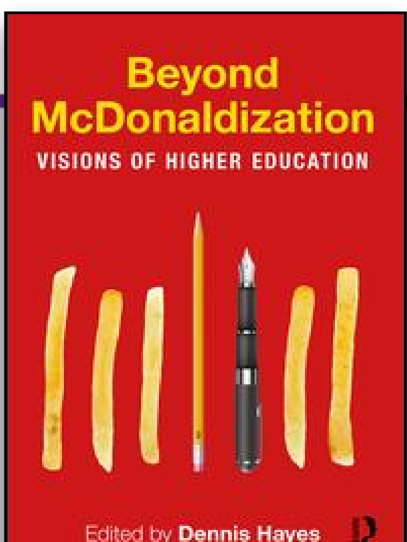
the classroom to be in closer physical proximity.

6. Weaver and Qi (2005) find that "faculty-student interaction seems to have the largest direct, indirect, and total effects on participation as reported by students." Fassinger (1995) added that the faculty's greatest impact on class participation comes from course designs. Therefore, changing the design of the class, from a talk-and-chalk lecture to one involving students more in the learning process through class exercises, activities, or discussion, can be an effective way to actively engage students in the learning process.

CHAPTER 5

# BEYOND 'STUDENT EXPERIENCE'

Ruth Mieschbuehler




This chapter is excerpted from
*Beyond McDonaldization: Visions of Higher Education*
Edited by Dennis Hayes.


Learn more

# BEYOND 'STUDENT EXPERIENCE'

RUTH MIESCHBUEHLER

Excerpted from *Beyond McDonaldization: Visions of Higher Education*

The term 'student experience' can be found everywhere in university publicity material and on university web sites. The claim to offer an excellent 'student experience' is now seen as a selling point with which to convince student 'customers' to come through the door or through the gate and into the quad. Universities compete among themselves to be listed in league tables as the 'best' for student experience or even to be labelled as offering the 'most improved student experience'. University managers are now beginning to talk about university being made up of the 'student experience' and the 'academic experience' but that bifurcation plays down the changes brought about in the name of the 'student experience' across the university and in the academic disciplines.

The concept of the 'student experience' is very familiar but also very new (see Haselgrove 1994). It refers to a fundamental change in the university sector that has seen a growing rise in student-centred and learning-process-oriented teaching and a retreat from the academic disciplines that had its origins in the climate of change at the end of the last century. This was a time when – after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War – politics and attitudes to young people were changing. These changes can be summarized in the celebratory Western capitalist mantra, 'There is no alternative' (TINA). The consequences of TINA for young people was the rise of a new politics that saw them not as active agents for change but as vulnerable and in need of therapy (see Ecclestone and Hayes 2008: Chapter 7). This new socio-political attitude to young people is the explanation for the growing concern with the 'experience' of students.

The shift to the 'student experience' can be formally said to have taken hold in British higher education with the publication of the Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in 1997 (Dearing 1997). Since then, the rapid rise of the idea has led to a situation where university policies and practices, and university education, are rewritten and developed to meet the 'student experience' requirements. This fundamental change occurred at the same time as the mass expansion of higher education to cater for more and more young people. This 'massification' of higher education (Fox 2002) occurred at a time when going to university replaced getting a job and, ironically, when there was a loss of faith in knowledge, described by some as a 'fear of knowledge' (Boghossian 2007; Williams 2016). This is the historical context in which this unique concept of the 'student experience' arose and developed to become the guiding idea of the university in the twenty-first century.

It is important to be clear at the outset about what the 'student experience' is. The public

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relations hype masks this by celebrating any and every aspect of going to university. There are just three essential elements to the 'student experience' in universities. First, the adoption of 'student-centred' approaches to teaching and learning; second, the elevation of personal or cultural experiences over knowledge; third, the existence of a large institutional administration which supports that experience. The 'student experience' is not about ensuring students have a nice time – they can still organize that student experience for themselves – it is about the reorientation of academia around subjective experience rather than the pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

After almost two decades of endeavours aimed at meeting the requirements of the 'student experience', the effects on university education and academic life are clearly visible. There are many 'improvements' in provision external to the pursuit of knowledge – such as 'induction events', the provision of 'social learning spaces' and 'personal tutors' – which have been devised to enhance student satisfaction. In the classroom the 'student experience' manifests itself through an expansion of student-centred education, which shifts the focus of instruction from subject knowledge to motivational teaching techniques and curriculum content that is relevant to the life experience of students. Teaching has also become learning process- oriented and distracts students from seeking subject knowledge by focusing their attention on 'learning how to learn'.

The effects on university education are devastating because universities are more concerned about student satisfaction, employability, the provision of modern facilities and comprehensive student support services and less about the pursuit of knowledge. A few simple steps to move beyond the 'student experience' are identified in this chapter. If these steps are not taken, universities will continue to reject knowledge based education and the idea that the purpose of the university is the pursuit of knowledge.

The shift towards student-centred education

Recommendation eight of the Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education entreated 'all institutions of higher education [to] give priority to developing and implementing learning and teaching strategies which focus on the promotion of students' learning' (Dearing 1997). This recommendation was readily implemented by universities already moving away from old-fashioned knowledge-based education towards student-centred education and learning-process-oriented teaching. After Dearing it was not long before the 'student experience' became integral to university policies and practice.

One way the new ‘student experience’ manifests itself is through the rising concern with student satisfaction. It is increasingly common to describe students as ‘customers’, and universities have entered a customer-service relationship with their students, which is why universities are concerned about student satisfaction (Woodall, Hiller and Resnick 2014). The current concern with the ‘student journey’ is believed to be essential to ensure ‘student satisfaction’. The student journey starts with the application phase and the careful structuring of the interactions between potential students and the institution prior to arrival (Temple, Callender, Grove and Kersh 2014). The focus is then directed at the academic and campus experience and finally at the graduation phase and transition into employment (Temple et al. 2014). At each stage of the ‘journey’ student satisfaction is being assessed and policies and practices are developed to meet the requirements of the ‘student experience’. The pursuit of knowledge is neither addressed nor mentioned.

Another development that demonstrates the rising prominence of ‘student experience’ in higher education is the creation and expansion of jobs that have the ‘student experience’ at their heart. Pro-Vice Chancellors of Student Experience, Student Support Officers, Student Experience Champions and Student Support Administrators have become part of the university, and the enhancing of the new ‘student experience’ is what keeps managers and many administrators occupied. This managerial focus on ‘student experience’ means that the relationship between students and the institution will have to be regularly renegotiated and adapted. It is a development that illustrates the self-perpetuating nature of the ‘student experience’.

The more universities are preoccupied with providing professional services to meet the ‘student experience’, the more the demands from students to improve or enhance that experience will increase and there will be less time to nurture the love of knowledge and understanding that is the purpose of a university. The integration of the ‘student experience’ into managerial structures sends the message that knowledge is no longer important.

On a national level, new developments such as the establishment of an Office for Students and the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework will consolidate the ‘student experience’ as the main focus of the university. The Office for Students will be responsible for overseeing funding, quality and standards as outlined in the Higher Education and

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Research Bill 2016–17 (House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee 2016a) while the Teaching Excellence Framework will be introduced with the aims of assessing the quality of teaching and the student experience of teaching in all universities (House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee 2016b). Once new assessments are introduced universities will undoubtedly be ranked in order of performance and this will give the desire to be excellent in offering the 'student experience' even more momentum. The value of these and other assessments that have the 'student experience' at its heart are rarely questioned. But they should be. The National Student Satisfaction survey (NSS) which, in 2016, ranked leading institutions such as University of the Arts, London, and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) towards the bottom (THE 2016) shows that these student-experience-based assessments have become ridiculous expressions of student whims, subjective judgements and feelings.

The fact that the value of these results and the subsequent rankings of such assessments are rarely questioned reveals the higher education sector's complacency and complicity in advocating the 'student experience'.

The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework displays the lack of trust by government in the ability of universities to provide a university education as autonomous institutions. If universities were trusted there would not be any need to introduce checks and controls on academics and higher education institutions.

The lack of trust displayed towards universities is symptomatic of a wider loss of direction that can be observed within the higher education sector. That there can be an emphasis on the 'student experience' reflects the decline of the authority of lecturers which, traditionally, was based on their subject knowledge. With the demise of knowledge-based education the traditional source of authority of lecturers has diminished.

In fact, student-centred education, by its very nature, diminished the authority of lecturers by asking them to listen to student opinions and to make all content relevant to their experiences. However, the idea of 'relevant knowledge' is deeply flawed because rather than introducing students to new and challenging ideas it reduces the content of teaching to what is perceived, often rather vaguely, as relevant to them. This traps students in the world they inhabit rather than providing them with an opportunity to

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develop their potential to the full by gaining knowledge and understanding of the world. When subjects, subject knowledge and the authority of lecturers are contested it means that universities have lost sight of the importance of the pursuit of knowledge and, therefore, of the purpose of a university.

How the ‘student experience’ was sold

Why have universities abandoned knowledge-based education in favour of student-centred education and learning-process-oriented teaching? The political or ideological shift in academic thinking that drives this development is the idea that knowledge based education is elitist and privileges students that enter university with traditional academic qualifications (Young 2013). The students that are thought to lose out in a knowledge-based system are those who may hold different academic qualifications – such as BTECs – or are said to come from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is these ‘non-traditional’ students who are said to benefit from student-centred education as it focuses on processes of learning and the development of skills that it is believed this group needs.

Although the student-centred approach to education now extends to all students and has become the norm within higher education, the belief that removing elitist knowledge-based education helps non-traditional students succeed implies that there are differences in learning between traditional and non-traditional students and that they require special approaches to education, teaching and learning to succeed. In reality it stigmatizes these students and underrates their capacity to learn and think like any other student (Mieschbuehler 2017).

A ‘manifesto’ for moving beyond ‘student experience’

In the short period of time when the ‘student experience’ has come to dominate university policies and practices and university education, a range of measures and initiatives has been introduced that, if they were to be abolished tomorrow, would mark the beginning of a shift beyond ‘student experience’ driven university education.

1) Abolish the National Student Survey If universities want to return to knowledge-based education, a start could be made by abolishing the National Student Survey. The National Student Survey, introduced in 2005 by the Higher Education Funding Council in England

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(HEFCE), has become the annual event that celebrates the reorganisation of the university around students' subjective opinions and away from knowledge. The survey is circulated among final-year undergraduate students at all publicly funded higher-education institutions, and it is proclaimed to be 'a widely recognized authoritative survey' that 'gives students a powerful collective voice to help shape the future of their course and their university or college' (Ipsos MORI and HEFCE 2016).

What the National Student Survey actually does is make the experience, opinions and feelings of students more important than the authority and judgement of academics. It gives university management their own research-base that enables them to discipline lecturers and micromanage what is taught down to module level by demanding that teaching is restructured to enhance student satisfaction. The abolition of the National Student Survey would immediately rectify the annual distortion of academic life and open up the possibility of restoring the authority of academics. It would mean universities would have to begin focusing, not on what students feel they want, but what students need to develop intellectually. Most importantly it would mean that academics could teach their subject freely.

Abolishing the National Student Survey would shake up academia and would send a clear message to students that going to university should not make you satisfied like a trip to McDonald's but should make you intellectually dissatisfied so that you demand more knowledge and greater understanding. Experiences are not knowledge and the pursuit of knowledge is what universities are for.

2) No more 'student experience' posts

If student satisfaction was no longer assessed, it would automatically save lecturers time and effort. It would also minimize the inclination to increase the number of posts that already exist or are being invented to help enhance the 'student experience'.

But that is not enough. It is time to do away with all 'student experience' posts. No more Pro-Vice Chancellors of Student Experience, Student Support Officers, Student Experience Champions and Student Support Administrators. Having fewer employees who are concerned with the 'student experience' would also reduce the current levels of policing staff are exposed to. Better still, the very suggestion that these posts should be abolished will open up a space for a renewed debate on what university is for. The National Student

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Survey cannot be abolished and 'student experience'-related employment cannot end unless academics and students are prepared to be provocative and start that debate.

3) No to the 'Office for Students' and the 'Teaching Excellence Framework'

The name says it all: the 'Office for Students'. Not the 'Office for Universities' or the 'Office for Higher Education'; the university is now all about the students and the 'student experience'. The national checks, controls and punitive sanctions that may come from the proposed Office for Students, and through the implementation of the Teaching Excellence Framework, will force university managers to drive the 'student experience' agenda forward in ways that will leave the knowledge-based university a fading memory. At the time of writing neither the Office for Students or the Teaching Excellence Framework are in place but they will be by 2017, 20 years on from the Dearing Report and the 'student experience' era that report helped create. They are not needed and they should be abolished.1

4) Bring back knowledge-based education

Probably the most objectionable consequence of the expansion of the 'student experience' is the decline in knowledge-based education in universities. Arguing for the reintroduction of liberal or knowledge-based education can seem like bringing back something from the past that may not be relevant for today's world. But knowledge-based education is and can be as modern as any other approach to education, including the student-centred approach, which is often misleadingly referred to as a progressive approach to education (see Kennedy, Chapter 4 in this volume).

Knowledge-based education is concerned with the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake and the development of the mind that results from knowledge (Hirst 1965). As Matthew Arnold famously wrote, the aim of this teaching is to learn 'the best that is known and thought in the world' (Arnold [1864] 2003: 50). In knowledge-based education all teaching must be rational and whatever is taught must be based on reason and logically consistent intelligent justifications (Newman [1873] 1960; Hirst 1965; Oakeshott 1989; Halstead 2005). Thoughts, ideas and theories must be presented in a way that leaves them open to critical and rational evaluation. The disinterested pursuit of knowledge, through the critical examination of alternative beliefs, is part of knowledge-based education and requires open mindedness, impartiality and the willingness to revise opinions as new evidence emerges (Halstead 2005).

Knowledge-based education has been criticized for being elitist and overemphasizing the academic study of subjects over other purposes of education (Martin 1994 cited in Mulcahy 2010; O'Hear 1981). This criticism has led to the introduction at all levels of education of 'normative commitments about what people ought to be like' (Mulcahy 2010: 7). These instrumental 'other purposes' of education, such as ensuring graduates are 'employable', 'environmentally aware' and committed to 'inclusion' and 'diversity', are now so commonplace that they seem to be part of the mission of the university. Newman in The Idea of a University argues, however, that 'knowledge is, not merely a means to something beyond it', it is 'an end sufficient to rest in and to pursue for its own sake', 'knowledge is capable of being its own end' (Newman [1873] 1960: 78).

It is time to bring knowledge back in to the university.

In the 'student experience' all is relative

But to teach knowledge we have to believe in it. In the university, relativism is rife. Hardly anyone believes in knowledge, and statements such as 'all truth is relative' pass without comment or criticism. The ubiquitous nature of relativism today is a result of a new phenomenon, 'cultural relativism', the widely accepted belief that all 'cultures' must be respected along with their unique value systems, which are accepted and acknowledged without comment or criticism. Relativism and cultural relativism together constitute an attack on knowledge (Hayes and Mieschbuehler 2015). Yet the university is the embodiment of Enlightenment values and has the unique educational function of advancing knowledge as well as teaching existing knowledge, although schools and colleges may also have that latter commitment. The way in which human knowledge and understanding is passed between generations, or advanced, is through knowledge-based education. If universities no longer believe in 'knowledge', they cannot pass it on and will have to resort to alternative educational aims, which partly explains the rise of the 'student experience' and student-centred education in universities, because for many relativists there is nothing but a myriad of incommensurate 'experiences'.

Relativism survives because of an academic culture that is favourable to it. The emphasis on 'experience' is the reason why relativism thrives. Talking about and interpreting experiences is a feature of student-centred education, and 'experience' dominates present national and institutional educational research. To undermine relativism, its self-contradictions can be pointed out. Probably the best-known self contraction which can be used as a refutation of relativism has been provided by Nozick (2001). He even refers to the example as a 'quick refutation' of relativism. Nozick showed that if someone argues that 'All truth is relative', this assertion is easily dismissed by asking, 'Is that view relative?' (Nozick 2001: 15). It shows that statements asserting the relativity of truth are self-refuting because relativists face a general problem. When relativists utter any statement, they must engage in 'truth talk'. For example, when relativists assert propositions like 'there is no universal truth to which our construction is a more or less good approximation', they engage in 'truth talk' (Bridges 1999: 610). Beyond simple self-contradictory statements, relativists also engage in 'truth talk' through their work; for example, when they state beliefs or discuss evidence. This propositional 'truth talk' also self-refutes the claim that all 'truth' is relative. These 'quick refutations' cannot be convincingly employed unless, through continual debate and discussion, an attempt is made to win the case for knowledge.

The argument for knowledge is based on the belief that we are rational human beings and as such 'it is incumbent on us to understand the reason for things, including the reasons for our conduct' (O'Hear 2009: 241). This belief requires teachers to initiate students into the inheritance of human achievement (Oakeshott 1989). Thoughts, ideas and theories must be presented in a way that leaves them open to critical and rational evaluation. The potential to inspire intellectual curiosity in students and a desire for their human heritage is the opposite of initiating them into the 'student experience'.

Beyond edutainment

The rise of the 'student experience' and the changes in university policies and practices, and in academic education, that have been introduced over the last two decades to meet the 'student experience' requirements have had a profound impact on the direction university education has taken. Universities are now preoccupied with concerns about student satisfaction and the student journey through university and into employment. To facilitate this they employ an army of people in student support services. Arum and Roksa described this new trend in education particularly with reference to teaching and learning as the preoccupation with 'the art of capturing audiences and entertaining them' (2011: 5). It is hard to disagree with them and to conclude that the 'student experience' is just edutainment and that would be something that students would reject if they saw it for

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what it was. Students do not, or did not, think about their educational institutions in terms of providing the ‘student experience’. Students go to university because they are passionate about a subject. Going to university may be packaged for them in terms of getting a job and being financially well off at some later date, but these instrumental motivations do not diminish the desire to get an education and to be intellectually challenged (Mieschbuehler 2017). This may soon change and students may eventually absorb the idea that university education is about them and their ‘student experience’. Likewise, academics do not think about their educational institutions as providing the ‘student experience’. Academics are still passionate about their subjects. Many believe that, as Oakeshott (1989) says, when lecturers engage in their daily scholarly activities students learn from them without having to be explicitly taught. Academics are told by managers that ‘employability’ and graduate destinations are the new business of the university and they learn to be ‘student-centred’ on teacher training courses. They may, in time, also absorb the idea that university education is all about the ‘student experience’. Let’s hope not and that they maintain the belief that the real ‘student experience’ is the ‘academic experience’.

Note

1 A positive sign that the Teaching Excellence Framework is not supported by students comes from a letter to The Guardian signed by many student unions and individual members of the National Union of Students: TEF is an unreliable test for university teaching, Letters, The Guardian, 10 August 2016: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/aug/09/tef-is-an-unreliable-test-for-university-teaching (accessed 10/08/2016).