

Feature

Enhancing student success: Taking the classroom success seriously

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Overview

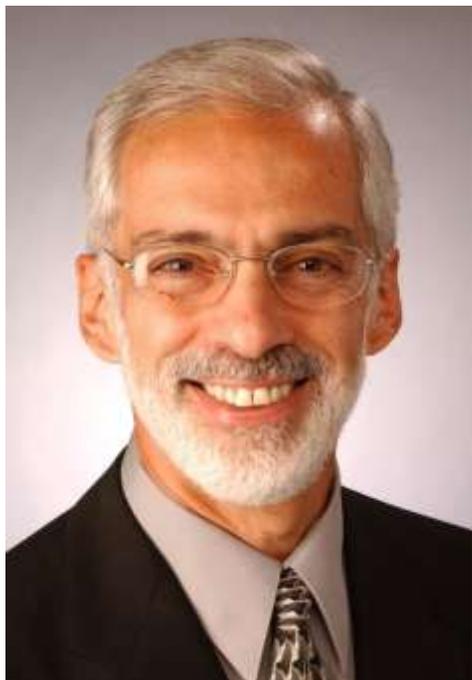
Professor Vincent Tinto opens this issue of the International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education by highlighting the importance of paying attention to students' experiences in the classroom. With the classroom experience of students in the United States college system firmly in mind, Tinto draws attention to what he calls the "attributes of effective classrooms". The classroom attributes he describes, such as clear expectations, timely support, feedback on assessment, engaging pedagogies and enhancing teaching skills, though drawn from the United States experience, are universal and as such are transferrable across national boundaries and applicable to higher education educators, leaders and policy makers globally. You can assess this universality by relating Tinto's criteria to your teaching environment.

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Biography¹

Vincent Tinto

Professor Vincent Tinto is Distinguished University Professor at Syracuse University and until recently Chair of the Higher Education Program. He has carried out research and has written extensively on higher education, particularly on student success and the impact of learning communities on student growth and attainment. His most recent book, *Leaving College*, published by the University of Chicago Press, lays out a theory and policy

perspective on student success that is considered the benchmark by which work on these issues are judged.

He has consulted widely with Federal and State agencies, with independent research firms, foundations, and with two and four-year institutions of higher education on a broad range of higher educational issues, not the least of which concern the success students in higher education in particular those of low-income and underserved backgrounds. He serves on the editorial boards of several journals and with various organisations and professional associations concerned with higher education. He chaired the national panel responsible for awarding \$5 million to establish the first national centre for research on teaching and learning in higher education and served as Associate Director of the \$6 million National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment funded by the U.S. Office of Education.

He works with the Council for Opportunity in Education, the Lumina Foundation for Education, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, and the United Negro College Fund's Institute for Capacity Building on issues pertaining to student success in higher education. He has consulted with the European Access Network and the Dutch Ministry of Education to develop programs to promote access to higher education for disadvantaged youth in Europe. His current research, funded by grants from the Lumina Foundation for Education and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, focuses on the impact of learning communities on the academic achievements of under-prepared college

¹ This bibliographical material was extracted from information retrieved from <http://faculty.soe.syr.edu/vtinto/>

students in urban two and four-year colleges.

Dr. Tinto has received numerous recognitions and awards. Most recently he was awarded the Council of Independent Colleges 2008 Academic Leadership Award, the National Institute for Staff Development International 2008 Leadership Award and was named Distinguished Fellow in the Council of Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations.

Enhancing student success: Taking the classroom success seriously

For over forty years, access to higher education in the United States has improved and enrolments have swelled from nearly 9 million students in 1980 to over 20 million today. But while enrolments have more than doubled, overall completion rates have increased only slightly, if that.

That this is the case is not for lack of effort. Over the past twenty years, if not more, colleges and universities, states and private foundations in the United States have all invested considerable resources in the development and implementation of a range of programs to increase student completions. Though several of these efforts have achieved some degree of success, most have not made a significant impact. This is the case in large measure because most innovations have sat at the margins of the classroom and have failed to reach into the classroom to substantially improve the classroom experience. Lest we forget, many students, certainly those who attend two-year colleges, commute to college, work and/or attend part-time. For them, if not for most students, the classroom is one, perhaps the only place, where they meet with academic staff and other students and engage in learning activities. Their success in college is built upon classroom success, one class and one course (subject) at a time. If our

efforts do not reach into the classroom and enhance student classroom success, they are unlikely to substantially impact students' success.

How then should institutions proceed? First and foremost they must direct their actions to the classroom, especially those in the first year, and construct classrooms whose attributes are such as to enhance the likelihood that students will succeed in the classroom.

Attributes of Effective Classrooms

What are the attributes of such classrooms? Generally speaking they can be described by the terms expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement. Unlike attributes of students, these are within the grasp of institutions to modify if they are serious about enhancing student success.

High expectations are a condition for student success, low expectations a harbinger of failure

Expectations

Student classroom performance is driven, in part, by the expectations that academic staff have for their students and that students have for themselves. Student success is directly influenced not only by the clarity and consistency of expectations, but also by their level. High expectations are a condition for student success, low expectations a harbinger of failure. Simply put, no one rises to low expectations. An academic staff-member's expectations are communicated to students, sometimes implicitly, through syllabi, assignments,

grading metrics, course management sites, and conversations. Students quickly pick up what is expected of them in the classroom and adjust their behaviours accordingly.

Support

It is one thing to hold high expectations; it is another to provide the support students need to achieve them. At no time is support, in particular academic support, more important than during the critical first year of college or university when student success is still so much in question and still malleable to institutional intervention. A key feature of such support is its being aligned or contextualised to the demands of the classroom and thereby enables students to more easily translate the support they receive into success in the classroom.

Assessment and Feedback

Students are more likely to succeed in classrooms that assess their performance and frequent feedback about their performance in ways that enable everyone – students, faculty, and staff - to adjust their behaviors to better promote student success in the classroom. This is especially true during the first year when students are trying to adjust their behaviors to the new academic and social demands of college or university life.

Involvement

A fourth, and perhaps the most important attribute of effective classrooms, is involvement or what is now commonly referred to as engagement. Simply put, the more students are academically and socially engaged with academic staff, and peers, especially in classroom activities, the more likely they are to succeed in the classroom. Such engagements lead not only to social affiliations and the social and emotional support they provide, but also to greater involvement in learning activities and the learning they produce. Both lead to success in the classroom.

Efforts to Enhance Classroom Effectiveness

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Though still limited in scope, there are now a number of efforts in colleges and universities in the United States to reshape the classroom by altering the way academic support is provided, improving the usability of assessment and feedback techniques, and restructuring patterns of student engagement in the curriculum and classroom. Several of these deserve special attention not only because of evidence that supports their effectiveness, but also because of their capacity to reshape the nature of classroom learning and in turn classroom success in particular for those who need additional academic support.

Contextualised Academic Support

The Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges developed the

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Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) initiative that enables students, in technical and vocational courses, to get academic support from basic skills instructors while earning credit toward a certificate or degree. This is achieved through the collaboration of basic skills instructors and academic staff who jointly design and teach college-level technical and vocational courses. As a result, students learn basic skills and program content at the same time from a team of teaching staff. The result is that iBEST students fare better on a variety of outcomes (e.g. credits earned, completion of workforce training), when compared with traditional students at the same proficiency level.

For some students, who are just below college-level work, accelerated learning programs that link a college-level course to a study or basic skills course yield similar results. Like I-BEST, such programs challenge the conventional assumption that basic skill instruction should precede the beginning of college-level work. For other students who require additional academic skills, learning communities are being used to connect one or more basic skill or developmental course, such as writing, to other content courses, such as history, in which the students are also registered. In other cases, they may include a student success or counselling course. In this and other ways, learning communities provide a structure that enables the institution to align its academic and social support for basic skills students in ways that allow them to obtain needed support, acquire

... learning communities provide a structure that enables the institution to align its academic and social support

basic skills, and learn content at the same time.

Automating Classroom Assessment, Feedback, and Early Warning

There are a variety of assessment techniques that can be used to assess student learning and trigger academic intervention when necessary. Classroom assessment techniques like the “one-minute” paper and the “muddiest point” have been in practice for decades. So are early warning systems that employ information on student performance to trigger intervention. What is new is the availability of technologies that allow academic staff to easily capture and analyse more and different data in ways that can provide a clearer view into student learning and automate previously time consuming tasks

whose effort often stymied efforts at wide adoption.

The *Signals* project at Purdue University, for instance, employs predictive modelling and data mining of student performance on mini-exams and patterns of utilisation of course materials on a web-based platform to identify students who are “at-risk” of doing poorly in a course. Once identified, the system sends alerts academic staff and then emails those students urging them to seek help via available resources such as office hours, study materials, and various academic support services. Though employed throughout the university, it has

proven most effective for students in their first two years of coursework.

Promoting Classroom Engagement

Instructional staff are moving to change not only the manner in which students experience the curriculum, as they do in learning communities, but also the way they experience learning. They do so by employing pedagogies of engagement, such as cooperative and problem-based learning, that require students to work together in some form of collaborative groups and become active, indeed responsible, for the learning of the group and classroom peers. In this way, students share not only the experience of the curriculum, but also of learning within the curriculum. By asking students to construct knowledge together, such pedagogies involve students both socially and intellectually in ways that promote cognitive and social development as well as an appreciation for the many ways in which one's own knowing is enhanced when other voices are part of that learning experience.

Building Effective Classrooms: Enhancing Instructional Skills

These strategies, especially those that employ pedagogies of engagement to enhance student classroom success, ultimately depend on the skills of the

teaching staff to effectively implement them in class. Yet unlike those who teach in primary and secondary schools, staff in higher education are not trained to teach their students. This is not to say that there are not many talented college and university staff who bring considerable skills to the task of teaching students. There are. Rather college and university staff are not, generally speaking, trained in pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment in ways that would enable them to be more effective in promoting the success of their students in the classrooms they teach, in particular but not only those who are academically under-prepared.

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Universities and colleges are, of course, not blind to the issue of teaching skills. For years they have invested in a range of development programs. Yet for all that investment, little change is apparent if only because most programs are not well conceived, are voluntary in nature, and/or attract a small segment of the teaching staff. Fortunately this is beginning to change. A limited, but growing number of institutions in the United States have established development programs that require all new academic staff to be part of a year or longer series of activities in which they work together in what amounts to a learning community, acquire pedagogical, curricular, and assessment skills appropriate to the needs of students, in particular those who require basic skills instruction.

Closing Comment

Efforts to increase student success are not new. But even when successful, they have been isolated, sometimes idiosyncratic, and often have not penetrated the classroom. If we are serious in our efforts to enhance college success, much must change. Our students deserve no less.