

## EDITOR'S NOTES

College student departure poses a persistent problem to colleges and universities that attracts the interest of both scholars and practitioners. Approximately 45 percent of students enrolled in two-year colleges depart during their first year, and approximately one out of every fourth student departs from a four-year college or university (American College Testing Program, 2005). These departure rates varied little between 1987 and 2001 (American College Testing Program, 2005). These rates of departure negatively affect the stability of institutional enrollments, budgets, and the public perception of the quality of colleges and universities. Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) call this problem the “departure puzzle.”

The departure puzzle has been the object of empirical attention for over seventy-five years (Braxton, 2000). During the past thirty years, considerable progress on understanding this puzzle has occurred as Tinto's interactionalist theory of college student departure achieved paradigmatic stature as a framework for understanding college student departure. Its stature is indexed in over 775 citations to his theoretical work (Braxton, Hirschy, and McClen-don, 2004). Nevertheless, based on their assessment of empirical support for the propositions of Tinto's interactionalist theory, Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) conclude that this theory receives partial support in residential colleges and universities and little or no backing in commuter colleges and universities. As a consequence, in *Understanding and Reducing College Student Departure* (2004), Braxton, Hirschy, and McClen-don advance a serious revision of Tinto's theory for residential colleges and universities and a new theory for commuter colleges and universities. Alan Seidman's edited book, *College Student Retention: Formula for Student Success* (2005), provides an additional treatment of aspects pertinent to our knowledge and understanding of student departure such as the measurement of persistence, definitions of retention, reliable knowledge about student departure, degree attainment, and the role of finances.

Despite such advances in our understanding of student departure, much work remains to be done on the translation of theory and research into practice (Tinto, 2006). Tinto puts this need into sharp focus by stating, “Unfortunately, most institutions have not yet been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation” (2006, p. 5). Such a translation of theory and research into practice requires a scholarship of practice. Eraut (1988) identifies four types of knowledge needed for professional practice. Of these four types, applicatory knowledge, which

involves the translation of technical knowledge into prescriptions for action, best fits the type of knowledge Tinto urges.

Tinto (2006) identifies the classroom as fertile ground for the translation of theory and research into practice. Empirical research focused on the relationship between classroom practices and student persistence constitutes a critical step in such a translation. Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) also posit a significant role for the classroom in student persistence in both residential and commuter colleges and universities.

Curricular structure and pedagogical practice shape the role the classroom plays in student persistence (Tinto, 1997, 2000). Some research demonstrates this role (Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, and Pascarella, 1996; Tinto, 1997; Braxton, Bray, and Berger, 2000; and Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan, 2000). Despite this growing recognition of the role the classroom plays in student persistence, the communities of research and practice need more empirical work to guide the translation of research into practices designed to reduce institutional rates of student departure. The *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* series provides an optimum medium for the presentation of such empirical work because of its role as a nexus between these two communities. This volume intends to serve such a purpose.

The chapters of this volume bring into sharp focus the complexity of the role that college and university faculty members play in shaping the persistence and departure decisions of undergraduate college students. Unfortunately, faculty members do not view student retention as their responsibility (Tinto, 2006). Nevertheless, they need to acknowledge the role they play in student persistence or departure decisions. Given that academics are likely to respond to empirical evidence about their role, the research findings presented in the chapters that follow should give faculty members some of the evidence they need to acknowledge the part they play in student persistence.

The empirical work included in this volume ranges from curricular structures and instructional staffing policies to the teaching practices of college and university faculty members. This volume consists of seven chapters, and each offers recommendations for institutional practice.

Curricular structures include learning communities: groups of students who take the same courses together, sometimes with an underlying theme to these courses (Tinto, 1997). Although empirical work on learning communities exists (Tinto, 1997; Zhao and Kuh, 2004), Cathy McHugh Engstrom focuses in Chapter One on the role of learning communities in promoting the persistence of underprepared college students. Learning communities give rise to pedagogical practices. Engstrom describes four teaching practices faculty use in teaching in learning communities that serve underprepared students. In Chapter Two, Jillian Kinzie, Robert Gonyea, Rick Shoup, and George D. Kuh also devote some attention to curricular policies and classroom practices that benefit underrepresented students enrolled in institutions of higher education. They derived their findings from the Connecting the Dots project

that used a combination of academic transcript data and responses to the National Survey of Student Engagement made by sixty-two hundred students at eighteen colleges and universities that include four historically black colleges and universities and three Hispanic-serving institutions.

Another aspect of the role of the classroom in college student persistence pertains to the instructional staffing of courses. The staffing of courses by contingent faculty in general and part-time faculty in particular looms particularly important given the findings of Ehrenberg and Zhang (2005) that increasing the number of part-time faculty has a negative impact on student graduation rates. In Chapter Three, M. Kevin Eagan Jr. and Audrey J. Jaeger give empirical attention to the effects of the proportion of graduate students and part-time faculty teaching gatekeeper courses on first-year student persistence. In their study, Eagan and Jaeger define gatekeeper courses as introductory courses in the fields of chemistry, biology, physics, mathematics, engineering, economics, sociology, and psychology.

Teaching skills and teaching practices of college and university faculty members form additional aspects of the college classroom that play a role in college student persistence. Chapters Four through Six present the findings of empirical treatments of these classroom aspects. In Chapter Four, Ernest T. Pascarella, Tricia A. Seifert, and Elizabeth J. Whitt address the influence of such faculty teaching skills as organization and preparation and clarity in instruction and answering student questions on first-year student persistence. In Chapter Five, John M. Braxton, Willis A. Jones, Amy S. Hirschy, and Harold V. Hartley III address the part that active learning plays in first-year student persistence. In Chapter Six, Thomas F. Nelson Laird, Daniel Chen, and George D. Kuh compare faculty teaching practices at colleges and universities with better-than-expected persistence rates with those at colleges and universities with as-expected persistence rates. In addition to teaching practices, they concentrate on the emphasis faculty give to intellectual and practical skills as course outcomes.

In Chapter Seven, I put forth the elements of a scholarship of practice centered on improving institutional rates of college student retention. In formulating these elements, I identify three contributions to a scholarship of practice made by the chapter authors. I also offer four recommendations for institutional policy and action designed to improve institutional rates of student retention.

College and university presidents, chief academic affairs officers, academic deans, directors and staff members of campus-based centers for teaching, and individuals responsible for enrollment management will find the contents of this volume useful to their practice. Scholars of faculty role performance will also find the contents of this volume useful to their research, as will scholars of college student retention.

College student retention remains a nettlesome problem confronting individual colleges and universities. By focusing on the role of the classroom, this volume demonstrates the feasibility of a scholarship of practice

centered on improving institutional rates of student retention. Through a scholarship of practice centered on the classroom and other dimensions of colleges and universities, some headway on increasing the rates of student retention at individual colleges and universities may prove possible.

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