

TEACHER LEARNING COMMUNITY: *IN AND BEYOND THE CLASSROOM*

Exploring Creative Strategies to Improve Retention

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A direct relationship exists between students' active involvement, participation, and integration into the college environment and persistence as well as academic success (Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993; Summers, 2003; Tinto, 1997). Student contact with faculty both inside and outside the classroom is important to successful student development. The classroom for many is the only place where involvement may take place and enhanced classroom experiences positively influence student persistence.

According to Aragon (2002), establishing and maintaining motivation in the classroom is the critical first step for faculty members who wish to promote successful learning. He posited that faculty members need to provide consistent substantive, detailed, and informative feedback to students throughout projects regarding directions for improvement and grades. He also stated that Native American students prefer collaborative learning and want to take part in as much of the course activity as possible. Cajete (1999) also supported this concept by noting that education should be modified for Native American students to include cooperative activities to gain group security and harmony. He also cautioned against pressing a class for discussion and using overt pressure on Native American students to respond quickly without ample time to carefully think about their responses. Faculty should provide encouragement to students along with guidance and demonstration. He recommended using a balance among teaching methods that emphasize listening, and speaking. These methods might include an inquiry approach, role playing, or simulation to demonstrate that students understand the material.

Another method of connecting students to the institution is through specialized orientation workshops and seminars that help students become familiar with the norms and values of the college system. Participation in these programs helps students become

academically and socially integrated into college and have been found to be critical to student success and to their sense of connection with the institution (McConnell, 2000; Merullo, 2002; Perez, 1998; Roueche & Roueche, 1994; Summers, 2003). These specialized programs play a vital role in supporting and helping students to balance school, work, and home and get through the tough times while working toward their educational goals (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). Cook (1996) referred to Johnson Community College in Overland Park, Kansas as a model program of orientation. He stated that being flexible is the key to their successful orientation programs. Their orientation program runs daily for eight weeks during the summer and helps students to apply for admission, take assessment tests, tour the campus, and register, all in the same day. In addition to orientation programs, a number of colleges provide specialized counseling and other types of support for students who are determined as at-risk.

### *Mentoring*

Also, mentoring relationships between students and college administrators and faculty is important to help students connect to the institution. This type of relationship is a successful method of reducing student isolation where faculty and administrators actively pursue students who otherwise are reluctant to seek support and guidance. Studies on student retention and attrition suggest that contact with a significant person within the college is a crucial factor in students' academic educational success and their decision to remain in college (Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Jacobi, 1999; Roueche & Roueche, 1994). Additionally, it is a good idea to have mentors of the same gender, age, and background mentoring students with the same gender, age, and ethnic background because students may feel more open and comfortable interacting with people who can relate to their needs and who they can identify with culturally. These mentoring relationships are important because they help students to integrate to the campus environment by

providing direct interaction between students and mentors, establishing nurturing relationships that encourage educational achievement, and influence students to participate in campus activities (Dumas-Hines, Cochran, & Williams, 2001; Jacobi, 1999).

According to Jacobi (1999), male students look for a mentor with status and power who can provide assistance with career development while female students desire a mentor who serves as a role model and fosters professional growth while promoting participation in personal and social activities. Mentoring programs are a successful strategy for connecting the student with college administrators, staff, and faculty, as well as other students (Jacobi, 1999; Perez, 1998). Formal mentoring programs can become a vital component of the education experience by increasing enrollment and retention of minority students (Pope, 2002).

### *Learning Communities*

Another strategy to enhance learning opportunities and increase communication between faculty and students is developing and promoting scholarly, academic interaction and social connections with faculty and students. This might include creating a collaborative community learning environment through supplemental instruction. This type of environment increases academic achievement and retention and can be a useful strategy in promoting a connection between students (Martin, Blanc, & Arendale, 1996). Quality supplemental instruction can be helpful if they are student-facilitated learning sessions in which students have the opportunity to discuss, process, and interact by reading, studying, and preparing for exams. Studies have shown that learning communities increase coherence in what is being learned, promote scholarly interaction, and help promote academic and social connections with faculty and students (Tinto, Russo, & Kadel-Taras, 1996). Beatty-Gruenter (1994) suggested that a learning community could be formed through creating the cohort effect by forming study groups in class as well as by

creating block programming for students with common courses. Some students may find that the academic culture conflicts with their home culture, and according to McGrath, (1996), their successful integration into learning communities sometimes involves adopting the norms, values, and practices of the college environment. However, other researchers argue that Western educators should adopt Native American culture and allow for flexibility within practical limits (Cajete, 1999). Agbo (2001) found that combining Native American and Western cultures fosters self-identity, pride, self-confidence; therefore making it possible for students to learn their own language and culture as a way of preserving their identity and bi-cultural education. This allows the students to acquire the same skills as those in Western society by aiming at a two-way approach or bi-cultural education.

Both two-year and four-year colleges are now redefining student learning experiences by restructuring the classroom and linking courses one to another so that students encounter a shared rather than an independent classroom experience (Tinto, 1997). One example of an institution that is currently utilizing this shared structure is Seattle Central Community College, in Seattle, Washington. Students enroll in two or more classes that share the curriculum across disciplinary areas. This innovative approach encourages students to address issues of their own learning and the mix of learning experiences challenges students' understanding of what it means to attend college and to learn. The process of collaboration between students and faculty provides a new innovative model of learning. These student groups work to collaborate on learning projects by developing improved communication with students and faculty as compared to more traditional listen and lecture approach to student education (Tinto, 1997).

### *Reaching Out to Students*

Researchers also emphasized reaching out to minority students while they are still in high school. They suggested that college admissions staff should visit minority high schools and minority students should come to the campus to learn about admissions and financial aid to promote the early involvement of the students with the college environment (Opp & Smith, 1995).

Elder, Martinex, Pace, Pavel, Garza, and Barnett (1998) suggest that effective economic strategies should be culturally appropriate to the community and take advantage of the local cultural and natural assets. They went on to say that these strategies should encourage confidence in the accumulation of wealth within the milieu of community, norms, and traditional values.

The Indian Nations at Risk Task Force found that schools that respect and support a student's language and culture are significantly more successful in educating those students. This Task Force also reported that institutions should incorporate Native perspectives and give education a multicultural focus to eliminate racism and promote understanding among all races (Reyhner, 2006).

Equally important, college administrators and faculty should demonstrate that they care about students' backgrounds and support family values through modeling learning for the students. Native families view faculty participation in Native community activities such as social events, powwows, and acceptable outsider tribal ceremonies as validating the administrators' and faculty members' respect and concern for their students (Reyhner, 2006; Wetsit, 1999).

### *SJC Microcomputer Applications and Database Management Classes*

In my COSC 125 Microcomputer Applications in Business and COSC 185 Database Management classes, students were required to complete individual projects that demonstrate their ability to apply what they learned in class. For my student retention project, I sought ways to improve individual student projects and student retention. At the end of the semester, I asked students the following three questions:

1. How do you feel about your experience with the individual projects?
2. What was particularly helpful to you in developing the projects? What aspects made these services/resources helpful?
3. What was particularly frustrating? What aspects made it frustrating?

### *Experience with Individual Projects*

The majority of the students found the student projects were a great way to reinforce the important application functions and tasks. Students commented the projects helped them to realize how much they learned. One student stated she especially liked the listing of the requirements and grading rubrics for each of the projects because it was easy to make certain that she included all of the necessary components in the projects. Another student commented the projects were helpful in preparing for the exams. While a different student related that she liked being able to apply her own experience to an assignment.

A student who did not complete all of the individual projects affirmed he felt they were a bit challenging. This same student found Excel and Access student projects to be particularly hard. He stated that though he thought about how he would create them, he could not figure it out. He went on to say that he attempted to complete the projects at least twice. He also acknowledged he found the Excel and Access textbook assignments to be very challenging. A

different student remarked that he also found Access to be very difficult and that the Access project made him look back at the book to make sure he was using the right procedures. He felt this helped him to retain the information.

A female student declared that she felt it was amazing how much she learned about the Microsoft 2007 applications. She asserted that she remembered when the semester began that she didn't know what she was doing and now prefers to use the Microsoft 2007 compared to Microsoft 2003. She also eagerly noted the strict schedule made her take the online class seriously.

Similarly another student expressed that her experiences with the student projects were helpful and that they helped to reinforce the applications. She went on to say that since the inception of word-processing that she has used WordPerfect and that she never had the desire or opportunity to use the Microsoft Office applications. She now uses the Microsoft Office 2007 applications in her day-to-day work life and no longer struggles and grapples with the applications.

#### *Helpful in Developing the Projects*

One student stated that a timely response to email messages was very helpful. She also said that responding to all of her e-mail messages in a timely fashion made her feel that her instructor took her education as serious as she did. Another student stated the step-by-step detailed instructions were very helpful. While other students commented that being able to refer to the internet, the textbook, and lectures while building their projects was particularly helpful. A female student said she felt the repetition of completing the projects in each chapter and one of the end-of-the chapter textbook assignments helped to reinforce student learning. A male student claimed he went beyond the only completing the required assignments and completed additional

textbook assignments and felt this was very helpful; especially, for the Access chapters which he found particularly challenging. At the same time as, a female student felt the class discussions concerning Access and feedback from other students was particularly helpful. The same student also asserted the extra individual help from the instructor made her feel very comfortable and less intimidated.

### *Frustrating in Developing the Projects*

A female student said that she found the most frustrating part was getting started; especially Access, as she did not fully understand what a database could do and what a table should contain. Though, she claimed that working on the project a little at a time eased the frustration. Similarly, another student commented that it was very difficult to complete the projects with a full schedule. He found that it was much easier to break the projects into manageable parts. He also found that if he stayed ahead of schedule, all the projects and the homework assignments became fun and kept him motivated to keep going. While a different student found it frustrating to apply the concepts and functions he learned to his own personal Access project. He was able to follow the step-by-step textbook instructions and successfully completed the textbook assignments but did not understand the process well enough to build his own personal project. Similarly, a female student stated the textbook does not visually give students the “big picture.”

### *Lessons Learned From Student Feedback*

I found soliciting student feedback concerning the student projects to be very rewarding. I felt students were very comfortable and honest. The student comments were interesting and helpful. A nice bonus was that many students were complimentary of the classes and me as an instructor. Some of their frustrations were not areas that I would have known about without their

feedback. Due to the student comments, I have modified the projects and lectures for the upcoming semester by asking students to have fellow classmates review their projects before submitting them to me for grading. I feel this will help to students to connect with other students, build strong relationships, engage and retain students, and a positive personal educational experience.

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