Arturo Pacheco

After a brief review of some of the literature on retention, the author examines some of the major issues in retention on urban campuses with high numbers of first-generation minority students, older students, working students, and students who commute to campus. He explores how Astin's notion of student involvement and Tinto's concept of academic and social integration pertains to such campuses, and describes some programmatic interventions designed to improve retention. The author concludes that broadly-based partnerships with public schools constitute a significant factor in efforts to improve retention in the urban university.

Bridging the Gaps in Retention

Themes in the Retention Literature

Although the research literature on the retention of college students is quite massive, most of it has focused on "traditional students" in what might be called "traditional universities." The literature has been dominated by research on the effects of college on students traditional in age, mode of attendance, and ethnicity, who attend traditional, often residential, institutions of higher education. Pascarella and Terrenzini's recent major work, *How College Affects Students*, with its more than 800 pages reviewing 20 years of retention research, and more than 150 pages of bibliography, reaffirms this focus. For traditional students in traditional settings, there is much that we already know about retention. We know so much, in fact, that Vincent Tinto, one of the major voices in research in the field, suggests that there aren't too many great secrets about effective retention programs, despite a growing array of highly paid retention consultants. He argues that "effective retention programs follow sound education, that the secret of effective retention lies in the development of effective education communities which actively involve students in the learning process" (Tinto, 1989, p. 2).

The importance of student involvement in retention and academic success is suggested throughout the recent literature. In his much quoted study, Alexander Astin defined student involvement in the following way:

"What I mean by involvement is neither mysterious or esoteric....A highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends a lot of time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students" (Astin, 1985, p. 134).

Two other important themes appear throughout the recent retention literature. The first, as Tinto (1987) among others has pointed out, is that out-of-class contact with fac-

culty is highly correlated with student success and retention. And the second theme, associated with the notion of the "involved student," is the notion that peer group contact is also perceived as crucial to student success. Astin goes so far as to say that "the student peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (Astin, 1993, p. 398). These notions of involvement and the importance of faculty and peer group contact are generalized in Tinto's widely accepted concepts of *academic* and *social integration*. Tinto developed a model of why students leave college, suggesting that failure of the student to integrate herself into the social or academic system of the university was highly correlated to attrition (Tinto, 1987).

These themes are important ones in recent retention and attrition research, and there are many studies that attempt to follow up on Tinto's and Astin's conceptual contribution to the explanation of retention and attrition among college students. In addition, there have been many efforts at retention interventions that take into account these notions by building programs that focus on student involvement and out of classroom contact with faculty and other students.

Yet, when we examine the experience of many of today's "non-traditional" students, many of whom attend urban, "metropolitan" universities, we see that retention programs based on these concepts may have to take on different forms.

Retention Efforts for Non-traditional Students

In many urban campuses of state universities like the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), the student body is definitely non-traditional. Students at UTEP are predominantly working class, commuter, working (most part-time, many full-time) first-generation-to-college, and ethnic "minority" (60% Hispanic). Reexamining Astin's notion of the "involved student," we find the following four elements in his definition:

- the student devotes considerable energy to studying,
- the student spends a lot of time on campus,
- the student participates actively in student organizations, and
- the student interacts frequently with faculty members and other students.

It becomes obvious that these key elements will have to be reshaped into new forms at metropolitan universities if we are going to be successful at getting working students with little available free-time and a sometimes discomforting feeling about the cultural and class milieu of the university to stick around and get properly integrated. Many of these students commute to their classes in the urban university, and leave immediately, often to work to support themselves and their families. They are often anxious to return to a social system where they feel more comfortable and supported, to their homes and families which may be far away from the campus.

Although there is much that we know about successful retention interventions, and the importance of the key elements identified by Astin and Tinto, we must adapt them, and retention interventions based on them, to fit the lives of non-traditional students. This will apply to many of the retention programs previously shown to be successful with more traditional students, including good academic advising, orientation, tutoring, mentoring, the use of financial aid, work on campus, and involvement in student organizations.

Building Campus and College Communities

As a first and very important step in providing the conditions Astin and

Tinto posit as important for retention, non-residential urban universities with large numbers of "non-traditional" students have intentionally to create new kinds of user-friendly support spaces that provide comfortable and supportive environments for older, multi-ethnic, commuting students.

At UTEP, for example, there are two locations that are central to almost all students on the campus. The first is the Student Union, which is centrally located and one of the few places where students can rest or have a snack between classes. UTEP has created a Student Activities Center in the Union, a kind of "one stop" shopping place for student involvement. Here, students can learn about the more than 100 student organizations on the campus, find out about volunteering in the community, sign up for classes to develop their leadership skills, leadership classes, or hear an engaging speaker.

The other central location on the campus is the library, a modern multi-story facility which is one of the best on the campus. Many students, even though they are commuters, study in the library because it is often difficult to create comparable conditions for study in their homes. In an effort to reach students where they are, UTEP has moved its Tutorial Learning Center to a modern, central location in the library, next to a state of the art computer lab. Here, students can find both the technology and the expert help to improve their academic work.

Both facilities are open late into the night to accommodate night students. In fact, all central student services (admissions, registrar, financial aid, counseling center, advising) are open two evenings a week to accommodate students who work daytime hours and go to school after 5 pm. All of these offices also employ large numbers of student workers and aides, peer advisors, and peer tutors, which serves the triple purpose of giving students on-campus employment, developmentally sharpening their leadership skills, and providing services to students from those who are sensitive to the needs of working, commuting students.

At the college level, UTEP's College of Engineering, which is one of the most successful in the nation in the production of Latino engineering graduates, has created a learning environment around the central offices of the college, where commuting students can hang out, get tutorial help, and bump into faculty members. Much of this effort is student run, and has proven that even working commuting students will stick around if given a good reason, such as a good chance of improving their academic success or being a part of a significant learning community

Making Retention Programs more Intrusive

In non-traditional institutions, a key factor in the effectiveness of retention programs may well be the *intrusiveness* of the activity, as measured by the extent to which participation in a retention program is required. Often, participation in academic advising or an orientation program, or tutoring for students with inadequacies in their preparation for college, for example, is on a voluntary basis, or only minimally required. In fact, it is often assumed that since the metropolitan university student is often a working individual who is older, and presumably more mature, there should be few requirements for participation in these activities. Yet it is precisely these students who may benefit most from participation in these retention programs. While their maturity and work experience is a definite asset, working class students have often been away from the school routine, have not developed or have not recently used good study skills, and may not know the value of good advising. Their very sense of self-sufficiency, which is an advantage in the workplace, may work against them in the often foreign milieu of the university.

Like so many institutions across the country that have adopted mandatory for-credit orientation courses for new students, UTEP is also considering such courses, either university-wide or with a particular academic focus by each of the colleges. These efforts can become the vehicles for insuring that certain types of integration, connection, and familiarity with support services are well known to all students. Although UTEP admits many students who are underprepared, it does so provisionally, on condition that they must take advantage of the academic advising center and must take courses and workshops offered by the Tutorial Learning Center.

Interestingly, it is not uncommon to find that much more privileged and well-prepared students at private elite universities will often avail themselves of the benefit of seeing an advisor or signing up for a tutor, while many first-generation working class students in those same institutions are extremely hesitant to do so. The reasons for this phenomenon are complex and subtle, and at a minimum have to do with knowledge of the university, parents' experience with college, class and cultural background, and the resulting attitude that the non-traditional student takes toward the university and its services. Working students, for example, often have to be convinced to apply for financial aid, even though they are needy and have no external sources of support. They have often taken the stance that they wouldn't have a chance to get aid, or they didn't deserve it, or they would rather avoid loan indebtedness by working more hours, often full-time. Middle-class students with college educated parents are often just as eager to seek out an advisor or to apply for financial aid as poorer students are hesitant. At UTEP, where the vast majority of the students are working class, all students attend a mandatory financial aid workshop during their orientation program. This process actually starts before college, as financial aid counselors visit all local high schools and give evening workshops (in English and Spanish) for prospective students and their parents.

In addition to making retention programs more intrusive in the university lives of working class and first generation college students, we may need to redesign the shape of many of these programs. For example, adding a parent or family orientation to a mandatory student orientation program will help non-college educated parents and families learn how to best support their sons and daughters or spouses. At UTEP, where so many parents are monolingual Spanish speakers, we offer parent orientations in both English and Spanish. We try to make sure that all students and their families understand the important decisions they need to make. Are they aware of the long term investment returns of taking out loans to avoid too many hours of work while going to school? Do they know the differential effects of part-time versus full-time work? Working on-campus versus off-campus? All students and their families should have this knowledge. For first-generation college students, it is absolutely essential.

Change the Student or Change the Institution?

In their excellent work on the academic achievement and retention of minority students in the university, Richardson and Skinner (1991) suggest that institutions that are more successful at retention are those that are structurally adapting themselves to better fit their diverse student bodies. This issue of an institution's willingness to adapt itself to its changing student body is a critically important one, and it is one to which there is significant resistance, particularly from segments of the faculty and administration who may perceive such adaptation as a lowering of standards. Mandatory orientation programs or courses, for example, may be perceived as "giv-

ing in" to the needs of underprepared students, or a lessening of the "real college experience." Although at UTEP there is still some faculty resistance to mandatory orientation courses, most faculty members realize that, in the last analysis, they themselves will gain much from these courses, in having better prepared and more university-wise students in their own courses.

Some already existing programshave only to be restructured to better meet the needs of working class students. For example, almost all colleges participate in work/study programs subsidized by federal funds, and for more privileged students this is often merely a way of making pocket money to supplement other kinds of support. For many young working class students, work/study is a *primary* source of financial support. Work/study programs can go far beyond just providing another job. They can and should be reshaped to include student developmental experiences, and orientation to the university in order to build confidence and assurance about being in the university. For many first generation college students (about 75% of UTEP students are first generation), the opportunity to work in a campus office, the library, or a lab may be their first opportunity to work in a professional environment.Properly structured, such jobs can bring about much important learning.

The root question is how do we reshape the university to provide a series of developmental opportunities for non-traditional students who aren't likely to live in college residences, join fraternities, or be able to afford a non-paying summer internship? At UTEP, with the assistance of federal grants, a number of development opportunities are available to students, and not at the cost of lost income from their jobs. One example is the participation of hundreds of students in co-op programs, which have placed them for a semester or a summer in well-paying positions related to their future careers.

Retention and the Mission of the University

Although it might seem obvious that retention and academic success of *all* students would be vital to the mission of any university, it is a concept that is often missing from many college mission statements. Indeed, one finds complacency in many universities that eventually graduate as few as one-third or less of the studentsthat enter them. Sometimes it is only declining enrollments and a resulting financialcrisis that stimulates a university's reexamination of the place of retention in its mission. Yet, retention and academic achievement for all students ought to be at the heart of the institution. In a paper presented at the University of California Student Research Conference at Asilomar in 1989, tinto reminded us that "...the secret to successful retention lies, as it always has, in the very foundations of the higher educational enterprise rightly understood, namely that it is at its core an enterprise committed to the education of all, not just some, of its students."

Should universities be complacent about their retention and graduation rates? What is an appropriate graduation rate for an urban commuter university with large numbers of working class first-generation-to-college students? While we are aware that 4-year graduation rates are meaningless at all but a handful of institutions, what is an adequate graduate rate over eight or ten years? As universities are increasingly attracted to the lure and prestige of research and graduate programs, are we settling for less for our undergraduates? In his latest book, *What Matters in College*, Astin suggests that, outside of the flagship research institution, the move toward graduate institutions has had a negative effect on the quality of undergraduate programs. In a

much more passionate statement, the historian Page Smith suggests in *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America*, that this move may bring about the death of quality undergraduate education. To what extent, Tinto asked in a paper presented in 1989 at the University of California Student Research Conference in Asilomer, California, are we continually serving the welfare of our students?

> "There is no programmatic substitute for this sort of commitment, no easy way to measure its occurrence. It is not the sole province of specific program or of designated program staff but is the responsibility of all members of the institutions, faculty and staff alike. As such, it is reflected in the daily activities of all program members and in the choices they make as to the goals to which they direct their energies. The presence of a strong commitment to students results in an identifiable ethos of caring which permeates the character of institutional life. Student-centered institutions are, in their everyday life, tangibly different from those institutions which place student welfare second to other goals."

Retention and the Role of the Faculty

No group is more powerful in setting the ethos of an institution than its faculty. Yet here, too, there is too often complacency, lack of concern, or the assumption that there is little that can be done. Particularly at large public urban universities, there is often little interest among the faculty in working to improve achievement, retention, and graduation rates. Perhaps it is because the classes are always filled, and an individual never sees the 40 percent of the students who do not return after the first year, or the two-thirds who never graduate. Like many of their colleagues in urban public schools, many faculty members don't see any responsibility on their part, and instead find it convenient to blame others: the quality of the lower levels of public instruction, the students themselves, their parents, their culture, and other things external.

The "low quality" or lack of preparation of entering students is often perceived as one of the defining characteristics limiting the overall excellence of any university. When this perception is internalized by faculty members at urban institutions, it can lead to low expectations of students, and little demand for excellence. This phenomenon is not unlike that found in some inner city public schools, where generations of young students and their teachers have been led away from the pursuit of excellence and toward complacency and an attitude of being satisfied with less. High drop-out rates, courses that are watered down, and goals of minimum competency are accepted as "good enough." After all, what else is to be expected from inner city students who are victims of all the ills of urban poverty? The problems that inner city students face in public schools are not unrelated to those they face upon entrance to the university, particularly in the attitudes of faculty members. They, too, can become complacent and have low expectations for the college students they have "inherited" from the public schools. Nothing could be more deadening to the lives of young people.

There are signs, however, that this is beginning to change. University-school partnerships are sprouting up across the country. The public school reform agenda initiated with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 has finally reached higher education through the increasing realization that the reform of the public school is inextricably tied to higher education, and there is a need for the simultaneous renewal of higher education and the public schools. The retention and achievement of all college students has much to do with the achievement and retention of students inthe public schools, and both will lose unless a massive collaborative effort among

faculty to improve both is launched. We can no longer afford to look at higher education and K-12 education as totally separate and distinct entities that do not collectively affect the lives and success of the students that are common to both ofthem. This is the new challenge that we face in retention.

A Promising new Context for Retention Efforts

It is in the area of working with our colleagues in the public schools where a promising new context for retention efforts presents itself. If there are failures with the academic and social integration of non-traditional students into the realm of university life, it is largely the result of the misfit between the student's experience prior to college and the experience of the first year of university life. As we have noted, this lack of fit is much greater for first-generation, non-traditional students, many of whom come from ethnic, class, and cultural backgrounds not well-represented in the university. Summer Bridge programs and extended orientation programs aregood attempts to bridge this gap, but they attempt to address only the gap between June and September.

We can, however, go far beyond these now more commonplace efforts. We can initiate new efforts to bridge the retention gap by working with our colleagues in the public schools and community colleges to reach non-traditional students much earlier in their pre-university careers. Rather than attempt to bridge the gap in the space of a summer between June and September, school/university partnerships across the country are now collaborating on much more ambitious endeavors. Here are some examples from the University of Texas at El Paso, although there are many variations in school/university partnerships in different communities.

Two years ago, the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence was established as one of the Community Compacts described elsewhere in this issue of *Metropolitan Universities* in articles by Kati Haycock and by Nevin Brown. This collaboration brought together the presidents from the university and the community college, the superintendents of the three largest school districts, the presidents of two chambers of commerce, the mayor of El Paso, and the head of a major community organization to work together in a common effort to raise the academic achievement and success of *all* youngsters in the community. With a constant focus on the bottom line--raising academic achievement for all students in El Paso, from kindergarten to graduation from college--these institutions are planning together and sharing resources to bring about a major systemic reform of education for the region. With generous support from The PEW Charitable Trust, the National Science Foundation, and the Texas Education Agency, many efforts are underway, including the following:

- A project on standards for admissions to the university, which brings together public school teachers and curriculum experts with university faculty to develop together the standards and expectations for all youngsters who wish to attend college. This effort has deep implications for both the curriculum of the public schools as well as that of the university.
- A collaboration with the community college to design first-year interdisciplinary science courses for college students.
- Discussions with the public schools, the community college, and the university on how to improve the transition for students as they move from one level of education to the next, from the public schools, to the community college, to the university, all in an attempt to create a "seamless web" of education from kindergarten to graduation from college.

• A massive collaborative effort to work with public school teachers throughout the region to help them prepare for major systemic reform of the schools--a reform focused on raising the academic achievement of *all* students in the region. This involves year-round work with all teachers, as well as intensive summer institutes.

• A major restructuring of teacher preparation programs in the university, oriented to preparing a new kind of teacher for the public schools--one who has the highest expectations for the academic achievement of all students as well as improved knowledge of content and better repertoire of teaching skills that will reach all students.

At first sight, the efforts listed above are not part of the usual catalog of retention oriented interventions one might find in a university setting. Yet, in the last analysis, these efforts may have far more significant impact than those that address student needs only upon entrance to the university. If these systemic reform efforts are successful, we are likely to have far more non-traditional students applying for university admission; they are likely to be better prepared, and the institutions that they come from and transfer to are likely to work together in an ongoing collaboration to ease the transition from one level to the next. This, of course, entails a radical shift in our vision. It entails moving away from focusing only on interventions that address retention only within our own sector, e.g., the university, the high school, the community college; and instead moves us toward working together in partnerships with our colleagues in the public schools to address retention problems at their roots, by building larger supportive communities for academic success. This is a large and difficult challenge. Yet, there is ample evidence that we can do it.

Suggested Reading

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