

Student Retention: Why Do We Keep Losing Them?

By Jane Arnold

A long sigh of relief escaped slowly through Yossarian's mouth when he saw that Snowden was not in danger of dying. . . it was simply a matter of bandaging him up and keeping him calm until the plane landed. . . But Snowden kept shaking his head and pointed at last, with just the barest movement of his chin, down toward the armpit. Yossarian bent forward to peer and saw a strangely colored stain seeping through the coveralls just above the armhole of Snowden's flak suit. . . . Yossarian ripped open the snaps of Snowden's flak suit and heard himself scream wildly as Snowden's insides slithered down to the floor in a soggy pile and just kept dripping out.

Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*

Whenever I take part in a discussion of student retention, I have the feeling that, like Yossarian, we are bandaging the leg wound while the patient's guts are pouring out all over the floor.

Why do so many students leave community college before they earn degrees? During my eight years at Middlesex Community College in Massachusetts, I have worked at registration and in the Advising Center, helping students choose courses. I have also taught in a special freshman seminar designed to acclimate students to college and cut dropout rates, and I have taught the range of English classes, as well as children's literature and world religions.

Doing all this has persuaded me that many students leave school for reasons over which instructors have no control.

First, some students lack motivation. School is expendable, class attendance and study something to

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be done after work and social life. One reason: School has not been a cultural value in the lives of many students' families.

In some families, the first generation to go to college is no longer a source of pride. Recently, a student told me he was the first person in his family to go to college, and no one could figure out why he bothered.

For too many students, college is now just one more hoop they have to jump through to get a job, and teachers are a barrier, not a bridge. A national study conducted in fall 1992 and spring 1993 found that "during college, first-generation students studied less. . . and completed fewer hours during their first year. They worked more hours off campus. . . ."¹

Those off-campus work hours replace study time. I once ran into a remedial writing student bagging groceries at a local market.

"I had extra time," he told me, "so I figured I could take a second job."

But this student didn't have extra time. He failed basic writing. Indeed, students may appear unmotivated simply because they do not understand the time and effort that must be put into succeeding in school.

"I have other things to do," they explain, when assigned homework. These students seem unable to

realize that a research paper involves more than an hour of cursory Web surfing.

Further, many students have not been expected to succeed in school. Students frequently write essays and talk to me about surviving low expectations in grammar and high school.

"I was told to stay in a low math class," noted one student, who was enrolled in three remedial classes. "I don't know why. If I'd taken the algebra class, I wouldn't have to take it here."

Another wrote: "In fourth grade, I was put in the resource room. They called it the romper room. All my friends knew I was retarded. My best friend across the street wouldn't play with me after that. We've never been friends again."

A tutor talked to me about a multi-handicapped student who was slowly, but clearly and joyously, gaining control of written English: "We didn't know whether he couldn't learn or he just hadn't been taught. It looks as though he needed to be taught."

Unfortunately, many good primary and secondary school teachers are overwhelmed by the same problems we face in community colleges. Class sizes continue to average over 20 students, despite widespread agreement that,

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whatever the level of education, smaller classes are better. In fact, formal research has finally caught up to this basic fact that teachers have known for years.²

In addition, teachers are expected to teach more subjects than ever before—computer literacy adds a whole new dimension. They are expected to integrate an entirely new population into their classrooms, a population that once was considered disabled and incapable of learning.

Finally, these teachers are increasingly required to provide the ethical and social structure that used to be the responsibility of family or religious institutions.

I once pointed out to my local superintendent of schools that when elementary school students spend half the day collecting goods for food shelters and hearing about AIDS, drug abuse, and suffering in Nicaragua, they no longer have time to learn to read, write, calculate, and reason based on research and logic.

Her answer, one I hear frequently, was, "But if we don't do it, who will?"

But if the schools don't teach academic skills, who will?

Teachers simply cannot replace family, and, as a result of trying, teachers are no longer able adequately to do the job they have

been hired to do.

Another problem: Students who have not been taught because they are considered incapable of academic success carry psychological scars that block further learning.

I've lost count of the number of students I've taught who are so angry that I find them difficult to teach. One semester I had a class where the anger was palpable. I had to brace myself before entering the room. I put a lot of energy into dodging that anger, energy that I'd rather have put into teaching.

Students bring other emotional problems into the classroom. A student who had struggled all his life with the effects of a birth injury and who was not even beginning to recover from the devastating loss of his single parent, managed to complete a semester of remedial writing.

This student didn't learn much about writing in my class—although I think he wrote some things that were important for him to write—and the following semester he didn't return to school.

Statistics say we didn't retain this student. Yet he succeeded in coming to class on a regular basis the entire semester, which I consider a significant success. His was the class in which I dedicated a full session to the issue of grieving and recovery, rather than continue to deal individually with the increasing number of papers on significant

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loss.

I have taught many students who won't have the interest or energy to learn until they have received some kind of treatment for chronic emotional and psychological pain.

Other students drop out because they're too immature to be in college. I cite this scene from registration as an example. I am helping to register a woman who has to take remedial math, remedial reading, and remedial writing. We are trying to find a fourth course that she is qualified to take, but nothing interests her.

"What do you want to do when you graduate?" I ask her.

"Child care," she says.

"Oh," I say, "then why don't you take a drawing course? It's great to be able to draw if you're working with kids."

"I don't like art."

"Oh," I say, a little less heartily. "Well, how about a music course? Kids love music, and they're easy to entertain that way."

"I don't like music."

"What do you like to do?" I ask, in desperation.

"Shop."

I now know this response is not unusual. I still don't know what to tell them to take.

I won't nag my students to do their work. Keeping up with assignments is the students' responsibility. I keep office hours

and require students to come to an individual conference in my office within the first month of class.

I remind them to call my voice mail and leave a message if they must be absent. I make and follow a syllabus. I write assignments out and repeat them orally. I publicize support services and encourage students to use them.

In spite of all this, I chronically hear, "I didn't know it was due," or "You have to keep on me to turn my work in." These students are not ready for college. I speak as one who started college when she was 25, got her BA when she was 35, and earned a master's degree at 42. People don't belong in college until they are ready to go.

One student, repeating remedial writing for the third time, once told me: "This time I know I'm going to pass it, because this time I want to. It makes me so mad now when I see other kids in the class fooling around and not working and making it hard for everyone else. That used to be me." She passed.

In other words, when we try so hard to retain students who are not ready for college, we risk losing others who could benefit from the attention we now give to high-risk students.

When I asked students to write an analysis of what they learned during the semester, one student

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wrote : “this (sic) class has improved my sentence structure. Especially my paragraphs. I still don't believe in them though.”

When this young man finally understands what he needs to do to achieve his stated goal of becoming a screenwriter, I hope he will return to college. One of the missions of a community college is to be there when our students are ready for us.

We also lose students for financial reasons. A colleague once told me that several students would not, as they had planned, graduate in the spring because they didn't have money for heat, let alone tuition.

I've lost track of the number of students I've registered who plan to work twenty, thirty, or forty hours a week and take four or five courses. They have to be full-time students to be covered under their parents' health insurance. They can't be without health insurance.

Someone suggested we remind these students that the college health fee is \$255 for students who are less than full time. Students who cannot afford \$20 for a book will not waste \$255 on health insurance if they can be covered under their parents' plans.

The Massachusetts economy is currently booming, and enrollments are again rising. Unfortunately, our legislature's response

has not been to put money into higher education for smaller classes and better remedial programs.

A recent study found that “retention rate is directly related to per FTE expenditures” in two-year colleges.³ College students—like their K-12 counterparts—benefit from smaller classes. Increased academic success might increase retention rates.

Instead, the legislature has cut tuition at state colleges. When I asked my students where they thought the money would come from for faculty and college staff salaries, they looked at me blankly. They'd never made the connection. When the economy slows again, I don't think we will have made any lasting gains in retention.

Students come to us so poorly prepared that many need significant remedial work before they can take college-level courses. Middlesex has just initiated a new Fundamentals of English course for students writing below the Basic Writing level (roughly below seventh grade).

The estimate is that about one quarter of the entering students will be placed in this program. In theory, this means that students must take two English courses before they can begin to take English courses for college credit.

Many students enter Basic

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Writing not knowing how to use any punctuation mark correctly except a period. Some do not know the basic rules of capitalization. Recently, only one out of twenty students would admit to knowing what nouns and verbs are.

I suspect that many of these students have never had their writing errors corrected or been made to correct their own. Some students have to repeat Basic Writing two or three times and many become discouraged and drop out of college. The unofficial pass rate for Basic Writing is 50 percent.

A significant number of students also take three remedial math courses before receiving college credit.

The problem of students who enter college unprepared is widespread. A recent study in Oregon found that “typically 40 percent or more of entering students fail to meet established standards for college level course work in math, reading and/or writing.”⁴

In any event, the success of remedial courses is not clear. Seon and King studied pass rates for students enrolled in an intervention project to help developmental math students. Their pass rates rose after the institution of the program in 1996 and 1997, but the pass rates overall appear lower than 1993 pass rates, and the increases

are uneven.⁵

One pilot study on intervention programs for at-risk students has reported—in addition to some successes—teaching staff concern that their teaching duties did not leave them time to implement the program fully.

Staff members felt that students may have ignored their advice or even found their efforts intrusive. Staff members were also concerned that such interventions may foster dependence.⁶

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What can teachers do? Teaching skills is our concern, and we can always improve the way we do our jobs. Half of the students do pass Basic Writing, and certainly some of these students go on to succeed in other courses and graduate. But many things we cannot do, although we try to find new ways to motivate our students.

Many of us regard our classes not only as “introduction to subject” but as “introduction to college.” We try to expand our students’ worlds with new words, new habits, and new ideas. We take them to the library and tell them about counseling and tutoring services.

I’ve seen a student sitting in a colleague’s office sobbing over a life tragedy. It says a great deal that he

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chose his English teacher's office to sit in and cry.

Many of us also try to keep down the cost of the textbooks we require. Nonetheless, we are losing many students because they are not ready or able to be in college, and colleges do not have the resources to bring their lives to the point where they will be able to stay. Astin has pointed out in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*,

A simple retention "rate" tells us a lot more about who an institution admits than about how effective its retention practices are. . . . institutions that admit large numbers of less-well-prepared students will tend to have low retention rates, and those with well-prepared students will tend to have higher rates, regardless of how effective their retention programs are.⁷

In other words, the underlying issues that cause students to drop out of college are beyond the capacity of the college's faculty, staff, or administration to cope with.

Retention rates may not even be valid indications of performance by colleges, as a recent study of a predictive model for retention rates points out.⁸ This article also raises questions about the impact of student demographics in discussing retention rates.⁹

What more can teachers do? We cannot force the legislature to give us more money. We cannot control the economy. We cannot reform the school systems from which our students come. We cannot force families to support their children—intellectually, emotionally, or financially—when they are in school. We're not qualified to give our students psychological counseling.

But we need to do all we can. As Edmund Burke once said, "Nobody makes a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little."

It would be a great mistake if we were to just throw up our hands and shrug our shoulders.

I've heard many sensible suggestions about what we can do to keep students in college, and I hope that some of them succeed. But let's be honest with ourselves and with our students, because being honest is one thing we can do.

When we focus on retention rates without looking at why students leave, we are ignoring the major injury and treating the minor one.

When an administration pressures faculty to retain students without admitting that the task may not be possible, already discouraged, overworked, and underpaid teachers have even less incentive to improve the teaching we have been hired to do.

When we put our energy into trying to retain students instead of teaching them, we are compounding the problem. Our classes are already too large, the attention we are able to give each student already inadequate. When our

efforts are further diluted by attempts to cope with problems for which we have neither time nor training, we are cheating all our students by not doing what most of us do so well: teach. ■

Endnotes

¹ Pascarella et al. 1996, 186.

² Mosteller 1999, 34.

³ Wyman 1997, 32

⁴ Walleri, Stoker, and Stoering 1997, 7.

⁵ Seon and King 1997, 2. For example, the pass rates for Tuesday/Thursday Arithmetic classes from 1993 to 1997 were 79.5 percent, 47 percent, 53 percent, 67 percent, and 41.8 percent, with the program being instituted in 1997. The pass rates for Tuesday/Thursday self-paced studies for the same period were 61 percent, 61 percent, 54 percent, 59 percent and

50.9 percent. The rates for the Monday/Wednesday/Friday pre-algebra class were 44 percent, 44 percent, 34 percent, 53 percent, and 51.7 percent, with the increase coming in 1996 after the program started. The figures are obviously preliminary, and Seon and King did not consider other influences on pass rates.

⁶ Walleri, Stoker, and Stoering 1997, 14.

⁷ Astin 1993.

⁸ Wyman 1997, 31.

⁹ Ibid. 32.

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