John Gardner’s Last Lecture: Everything You May or May Not Already Know or Wanted to Know About Student Retention (in 30 minutes)

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A Few Opening Perspectives
I was almost not retained: why should you listen to Gardner (3F’s, 2D’s, and 1 A)?
An occasion for self congratulations: retention is essentially flat—that’s an accomplishment.
There is consensus that institutional retention rates understate individual student rates—question is by how much?
A central question is “Who is responsible for student retention?”
There are many elements of public policy that make retention more of a challenge, especially with respect to: financial aid; the legislative interest in starting more students in community colleges; rewarding colleges for enrollment rather than student performance; funding formulas that may or may not reward the first college year; penalizing campuses for developmental education.
Policy makers on and off campuses have little empathy for students least likely to be retained, for our college experiences were so different, and we think should be normative.
Retention is our value but not necessarily a high one for many students.
Until recently we have had a high tolerance for failure and we assumed the rightness of academic social Darwinism.
We have made it very easy to drop out/stop out
Students are highly mobile and lack loyalty to a brand, just like other Americans.
High school isn’t working for many—especially in math preparation—the key intellectual competency for all the pre-wealth majors! Need to declare war on disgraceful college math failure rates.
US lacks requirements for national service and has no tradition of a gap year. Thus there’s more immaturity in new students.
There is a “male problem” although few leaders seem to really want to talk about this.
Today’s students don’t learn the way we teach (implications for faculty development)
Remember, colleges were designed for people like me, not today’s students—we’ve changed the pipeline, but not the pipe
The faculty rewards culture, in most tiers, works against improving student retention.
“Retention” may be the wrong conversation, the wrong language—needs to be redefined to:

- Learning
- Academic success
- The first-year experience/new student experience
- To a more generic concept of “transition”
- From a set of peripheral activities to ones that are more central
If you accept the desirability of improving retention, the first year of college cries out for attention, study, and especially action!
Must rethink historic purposes of first college year:

• Make money
• Weed out
• Allow senior profs to do as they please
• Maintain the status quo
With few exceptions, programs and initiatives intentionally designed for first-year students are still on the periphery of institutional life--i.e., focus not in the classroom, not on what faculty do; primary emphasis on what student affairs staff and academic administrators do.
1. Advising (training, evaluation, rewarding, improved information and accessibility).
2. Improved diagnostic assessment, testing, course placement and tracking.
3. Orientation (longer, required vs elective, credit vs non-credit).
4. Student affairs co-curricular programming.
5. Peer leader focused programming (advising, counseling, orientation, tutoring, leadership, etc).
6. Counseling services.
7. Career planning.
8. Remedial/developmental education and services.
9. Academic support services.
10. First-year seminars.
11. Learning communities.
12. Supplemental Instruction.
14. Health education initiatives to address STD’s and binge drinking.
15. Residence hall programming and academic redesign.
16. Assistance for commuter students.
17. Assistance for non-traditional students.
Teaching/Learning
Is Student Retention a Shared Goal?

Common Points of Dissension

- Improving retention = admitting better students
- Retention = lowering standards, coddling
- “Student success” = code for retention
- Retention = someone else’s job
- Many students don’t belong in college
Is Student Retention a Shared Goal?

- More students than we can accommodate = why worry about retention?
- Retention focus = consumerism or “customer service”
- Retention = a topic that is banal and lacks intellectual substance
Why is the beginning college experience important?

It is the FOUNDATION for:

- the undergraduate curriculum
- choosing a major
- establishing a good GPA
- learning good study habits
- developing “economies of time”
- developing positive attitudes toward faculty
- getting in the habit of interacting with faculty outside of class
- developing positive attitudes toward the campus
- developing long term relationships that will last through and beyond college
- deciding on which groups to affiliate with
- acquiring behaviors that may carry over beyond college
- redefining roles between students and family members, and employers
- introducing students to civic engagement
- providing a baseline for assessment of student characteristics, behaviors, and learning outcomes
Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year

Signature project of the Policy Center on the First Year of College

- outgrowth of the work of John N. Gardner & associates
- founded 1999, Pew Charitable Trust grant
- funded (2003-2004)
  - Lumina Foundation for Education
  - The Atlantic Philanthropies
What should a campus be doing for first-year students?

What defines ‘best practice’ in the first year of college?

How can assessment efforts lead to real improvement?

Answer...

An aspirational model of excellence &
Process to evaluate achievement of excellence
Building the Aspirational Model

6 Draft Dimensions of Excellence

219 Institutional Task Forces
add – delete – edit Dimensions

-94 CIC Dimensions
-125 AASCU Dimensions

9 AASCU Dimensions
8 Shared Dimensions
11 CIC Dimensions

24 “Founding Institutions” - intensive pilot sites
72 “Affiliate Institutions” - independent self-study sites

Developed by the Policy Center staff Winter 2003
Vetted by AASCU & CIC Spring 2003

Aug 2003 - Dec 2004
Foundational Dimensions – version 2.0
Foundations of Excellence™
in the First College Year

Dimensions of Excellence

• Defining characteristics of effectiveness
• Broad statements
• Multiple perspectives
• Core concepts – not required programs

http://www.brevard.edu/fyfoundations/aascu/dimensions.htm
Approach the first year in ways that are intentional and based on a philosophy/rationale of the first year that informs relevant institutional policies and practices.

- Intentional
- Consistent with Mission
- Broad Consensus
- Basis for Decision-Making
Create organizational structures and policies that provide a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach to the first year.

- Oversight & Alignment
- Partnerships
- Ongoing Development
- Appropriate Budget

Foundational Dimensions – version 2.0
Foundations Institutions . . .
Facilitate appropriate recruitment, admissions, and student transitions through policies and practices that are intentional and aligned with institutional mission.

- Communicating Expectations
- Providing Support
- Creating Linkages
Elevate the first college year to a high priority for the faculty.

- Communicate Expectations
- Support with Rewards
- Faculty/Student Interaction
Serve all first-year students according to their varied needs.

- Average, “At-Risk,” and Honors
- Targeted and Universal Efforts
- Assess & Adjust
- Respect

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Engage students, both in and out of the classroom, in order to develop attitudes, behaviors, and skills consistent with the desired outcomes of higher education and the institution’s philosophy and mission.

- **Intellectual Curiosity**
- **Critical Thinking,**
- **Moral/Spiritual Development,**
- **Civic Responsibility**
Ensure that all first-year students experience diverse ideas, worldviews, and peoples as a means of enhancing their learning and preparing them to become members of pluralistic communities.

- Different People
- Different Ideas & Values
- Different Cultures
Conduct assessment and maintain associations with other institutions and relevant professional organizations in order to achieve ongoing first-year improvement.

- Data-based decisions
- Professional knowledge-base
- Assessment linked to action
- Measured outcomes
Begin a process by which students gain an understanding of what it means to be an educated person.

First-Year Intellectual Experience
Clear Academic Goals
Charting Progress

CIC Dimensions – version 2.0

Foundations Institutions . . .

Philosophy
Organization
Transitions
Faculty
All Students
Engagement
Diversity
Improvement

Educated Person (CIC)
Institutional Commitment (CIC)
Life Purpose (CIC)
Roles & Purposes (AASCU)

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Build commitment of first-year students to the institution through a clear articulation of its identity and ethos.

**CIC Dimensions – version 2.0**

Foundations Institutions . . .

- Recruitment
- First-Year Curriculum & Co-Curriculum
- Institutional Values & Heritage

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Involve all students in an exploration of life purpose through instructional content and reflections on life experiences.
Promote student understanding of the various roles and purposes of higher education, both for the individual and for society, and support the development of relevant personal goals.

- **Balance of Personal Enrichment, Career Preparation, Citizenship, Serving the Public Good**
Building the Measurement Model

Data Sources

Campus Qualitative Evidence

CSHE Faculty, CAO & CSAO Surveys

National Survey of Student Engagement
Research component

ACADEMIC & COGNITIVE Development

ATTITUDES & VALUES

PERSISTENCE in Higher Education

PSYCHOSOCIAL Development

Research design – P. Terenzini, 2003
PERSISTENCE in Higher Education

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Task Forces – Evaluation Component

Based on . . .

- Professional Judgment
- Campus-Specific Knowledge
- Local Analysis
- Multiple Perspectives

Key elements . . .

- Cross-functional Membership
- Local Liaison to the Policy Center
- VPAA Involvement
- Evidence Driven
Task Force Work. . .

Met 2+ times/month
Current Practices Inventory
Qualitative Performance Indicators
NSSE data
CSHE data (Faculty, CAO, CSAO)
The End Results . . .

Improvement component

1. Scorecard of Excellence
2. Inventory of Practices and Data
3. Improvement Plan
4. ACTION
AASCU Founding Institutions

City University of New York, Brooklyn College
City University of New York, Medgar Evers College
Chadron State College
Georgia Southwestern State University
Illinois State University
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis
Kennesaw State University
Missouri Western State College
Plymouth State University
State University of New York College at Brockport
Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi
University of Wisconsin - Parkside
CIC Founding Institutions

Augsburg College
Aurora University
Columbia College
Endicott College
Franklin Pierce College
Indiana Wesleyan University
Madonna University
Maryville College
Marywood University
Nazareth College of Rochester
St. Edwards University
University of Charleston
Summary

Aspirational model vetted by peer institutions
Measurement model created
Core elements include:
  Local Task Force
  Use of local and national forms of evidence
  Professional judgments
Improvement Plan
Action
Dissemination component

National Teleconference

• December 2, 2004     1:00 – 4:00 pm EST
• Free for all AASCU & CIC Members
• Beam the results directly to your campus
What are participants saying about the Foundations Project?

“The Foundations of Excellence project has given us an opportunity to focus on the first-year experience in a way that our other assessment initiatives have not. The findings of the taskforce will have a long-lasting impact on how we look at this critical period of the first year.”

President Donald P. Wharton
Plymouth State University
Plymouth, New Hampshire
What are participants saying about the Foundations Project?

“Even though this study has been a great deal of work, the resulting synergy far outweighs the considerable effort we’ve put into it.”

Vice-President and Provost Virginia Barry
Plymouth State University
Plymouth, New Hampshire
What are participants saying about the Foundations Project?

“Even if we hadn’t had those countless meetings on the Dimensions, our participation in the Foundations of Excellence project has helped us make contacts, nationwide, who have helped us immeasurably to take a new look at the first year.”

Associate Vice-President for Undergraduate Studies, Julie Bernier
Plymouth State University
Plymouth, New Hampshire
What are participants saying about the Foundations Project?

“The Foundations project activities led us through what was essentially a cross-campus self-study of our FYE, with immediate feedback, both from the experts at the National Policy Center and the other benchmark institutions. . . Illinois State University has already profited enormously from our participation in the Foundations of Excellence in the First Year project.”

Provost, John Presley
Illinois State University
Normal, IL
What are participants saying about the Foundations Project?

“As a university campus community, being honest about your strengths and in particular, your weaknesses can be difficult. We have been challenged, as a Founding Institution, to be brutally honest and to be fully dedicated to increasing student learning and promoting student success for first year students. The process is creating new consensus among faculty and staff as well as a greater commitment to student success!”

Michael Hanes, President
Georgia Southwestern State University
Americus, GA