Reflections on the Retention Narrative Extending Critical Pedagogy Beyond the Classroom

Alison Hicks
*University of Colorado Boulder*, alison.hicks@colorado.edu

Caroline Sinkinson
*University of Colorado Boulder*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholar.colorado.edu/libr_facpapers](https://scholar.colorado.edu/libr_facpapers)

Recommended Citation

This Book Chapter/Section is brought to you for free and open access by University Libraries at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Libraries Faculty & Staff Contributions by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.
CHAPTER 18

Reflections on the Retention Narrative

Extending Critical Pedagogy beyond the Classroom

Alison Hicks and Caroline Sinkinson

Introduction

In October 2015, the U.S. Department of Education released the College Scorecard, a website that explicitly links the quality of an institution with its ability to retain students. Designed to guide students’ choice of institution based on graduation rate, as well as other factors, including tuition cost and post-graduation salary, the website demonstrates both growing popular interest in student completion as well as the very real pressures on institutions to raise levels of retention. Yet, while a focus on retention can certainly help to facilitate success and address structural inequities within higher education, there is a danger that if these initiatives are not implemented thoughtfully, they might be counterproductive and harmful to the students that they are designed to assist. As Pegeen Powell, an educator whose work has focused on critically engaging with the retention literature, warns us, the seductiveness of this discourse often obscures a number of questionable assumptions about students as well as troublesome implications about the purpose of higher education. This essay, by two teaching librarians who are engaged in retention and student success initiatives, forms an initial attempt to explore these ideas in the context of the library and to engage librarians in a mindful reflection.
Retention is a multifaceted concept that researchers have spent decades working to unravel, and a variety of psychological, sociological, and more recently, campus climate and diversity-focused approaches have been used in order to identify and understand the significant contributing factors to students’ completion. Originally designed to help institutions respond to the broadening of access to higher education in the 1950s, as well as to the flattening of student numbers in the 1970s, retention research draws upon the understanding that student success benefits both the individual student, in terms of income and employment, as well as society more generally, in terms of an educated citizenship. These ideas have led to an in-depth examination and correlation of various dimensions of student life with success and failure, including integration and engagement into the academy, development of students’ coping strategies such as self-efficacy and self-concept, demographic background and academic preparedness, social activities and engagement across nonacademic institutional programming, practical considerations such as finance and health, as well as various other environmental factors.

Retention research has led to an enormous amount of data from which institutions and individuals can begin to think more deeply about student completion and success. For many authors, data that shows positive correlation between student characteristics (for example, incoming GPA) and their decision to leave demonstrates that failure to retain a student is an individual problem that can be predicted. For other authors, the idea of integration is key, with students who are aligned academically and socially with an institution being more likely to remain enrolled. The variety of approaches that have been used to think about retention and, in particular, the question about whether it is an individual or an institutional issue, may also help to explain why the idea of retention and success is so hard to define. Definitions of retention that are framed by the institutional perspective (degree attainment and success in retaining students) in contrast to those framed by a student perspective (goal completion, even if that means leaving) may result in the design of vastly different interventions and programs.

The importance of programing in campus retention efforts gives libraries the opportunity to become increasingly involved in the provision and creation of services to support student success. Building upon campus efforts to enhance tutoring and mentor programs, residential living or learning communities, and more recently, early alert systems, the library is able to support what are known as high-impact practices, or the activities and experiences that increase rates of student retention and engagement. This has led to the creation of a number of intentional, structured collaborations with student support services, undergraduate research experiences, and university learn-
ing communities, as well as more informal programming, such as therapy dogs, stress breaks, and game nights. Through these efforts, librarians develop strong student relationships and cultivate community and belonging, practices that are considered to play an important role in retention. More recently, ideas of student success have also been explored in studies that have attempted to measure the impact of libraries on retention efforts, whether this is through a survey of librarian involvement in retention programs or the correlation of library use, instruction, circulation counts, or collection expenditure with student grades or retention rates.

This renewed focus on student learning and growth is vital, and we are encouraged to see library deans, among others, demonstrating such visible support for retention efforts. Although, we recognize that library administrators’ focus on metrics is not surprising given the pressures to demonstrate relevance and impact to the broader academic community, we join Nicole Pagowsky and Jaime Hammond in arguing that studies that correlate student achievement with library usage can be “problematic.” However, as we continue to observe and participate in discussions about the shape of retention, we have grown increasingly uneasy with the conflict that we noted between the language, purpose, and goals of retention efforts. We worry that too often, the dominant retention rhetoric takes an institutional perspective, focusing on retention as an individual problem rather than examining the role of the institution or looking at questions of access and success. We are also concerned that students are being seen as data points rather than as individuals, a process that often fails to capture the bigger sociocultural picture. Acknowledging the troublesome nature of these observations, we turned to a foundational element of our professional identities, critical pedagogy.

One of the key aspects of critical pedagogy is conscientization, or the process of “developing a critical awareness of one’s social reality through reflection and action.” Recognizing our discomfort with what we were seeing and reading about retention, we felt that an extended, critical, and dialogic reflection could help us to identify and to expose the tensions and contradictions. At the same time, we felt that this reflection would help us to re-examine our pedagogical beliefs and deepen the critical awareness to which we aspire; after all, true conscientization doesn’t end at the classroom door. While there has been a recent resurgence in interest in critical pedagogy and the nature of the librarian’s role and activities within instructional scenarios, we argue that the inherent problem-posing self-reflection that is engendered within critical pedagogy must force us to think about and transform inherited teaching practices outside the classroom, too. The use of critical pedagogy as a frame for this reflection thereby allows us to question and to identify a number of assumptions that underlie understandings of retention, as well as motivating us to think more carefully about our future approaches to this topic.
Beginning Our Investigation

Banking Model of Education

Critical pedagogy rejects the banking models of education that treat teachers as the authoritative purveyors and enforcers of knowledge and students as passive receptacles that are waiting to be filled with ideas. Critiqued for hindering students’ intellectual growth and for dehumanizing both students and teachers, banking models can also be seen to obscure students’ authentic and varied experiences, an idea that seemed especially troublesome as we thought more carefully about the rhetoric of retention. More explicitly, when we directly associate retention with students’ engagement, or their ability (or inability) to “integrate” into or “commit” to the established campus culture, we imply that students must disconnect from their own reality and to be subsumed into authoritative or dominant institutional values and norms in order to be successful within academia. As Crowley points out, socialization is seen to have succeeded when “it supplements or even erases students’ home languages.”

From a critical pedagogy perspective, framing education as acculturation is problematic not least because it restricts the possibilities of diverse educational spaces and judges who has the right to participate in higher education by supposing that there “is a single uniform set of values and attitudes in an institution.” More worryingly, these ideas place the impetus for change on the student rather than on the institution, which, by the very nature of higher education, can be highly exclusionary. As Powell points out, these ideas are highly problematic because they demonstrate an “inability to envision an institution of higher education that can successfully educate every student who sits in our classrooms.”

In turn, this narrative can lead to programming and support structures that are explicitly designed to facilitate student assimilation into the campus culture, or to “internalize the norms, values, and technologies of their new academic, social, and bureaucratic cultural landscape.” When librarians participate in programs that emerge from these initiatives, we may unknowingly reinforce attempts to assimilate students into academic values by positioning information literacy either as a tool of compliance or as a generic academic prerequisite that can be mastered through simplistic remedial trainings. This framing flies in the face of both our professional values and recent information literacy scholarship.

The banking model of education also flattens academia by ignoring the diversity and strength of students’ prior experiences, backgrounds, and goals, an idea that may also be applied to notions of success and retention. If we devalue students’ self-defined goals in favor of measurement by course, program, or degree attainment, we flatten our understanding of student success.
Metrics of success that capture an institution’s ability to retain students are “frequently utilized as measures of accountability and...consequently aligned with policymakers’ and practitioners’ interests.” The focus on institutional goals privileges normative or dominant ideas of success, while also advantaging those students whose values are already in alignment with the institution. An imposed notion of success further risks denying the fact that students are equipped to set their own goals that may or may not match those of the institution; as Powell notes, “Success for many of our students may not happen in the academy.” These ideas are mirrored in library instruction that privileges academic information systems or literacies without inviting critique or bridging prior information experience. The focus on institutional measures of achievement can also be seen when educators reduce indicators of students’ information literacy to results from standardized tests or to the assessment of mechanical information-seeking skills.

Further, these ideas may disadvantage those whose values diverge from imposed models of success by essentializing or stigmatizing groups of individuals. Institutions may label students who are unable to meet their imposed goals as unmotivated or at risk, a term that immediately positions the student as a problem, or against the norm and in need of a solution. Institutions may also attempt to identify the individual characteristics that are perceived to be barriers to acculturation, correlating descriptors or factors such as demographics and academic preparation or “readiness” through predictive algorithms and using them to judge how well individuals will integrate or fit into the institution. These ideas oversimplify the connections between students’ backgrounds and their goals by reducing success to determinant variables without sufficient consideration for the structural constraints that shape and influence the complex psychological, cognitive, and social experiences of students at college or university. They also run the risk of further demeaning nontraditional students by positioning them as in need of increased support. The divide can, perhaps, be seen most starkly when retention messages are contrasted with the lofty goals of institutional mission and value statements; while nontraditional students must be first socialized, acculturated, and fixed, students who are not seen to be at risk of dropping out are encouraged to create, explore, and participate in enriching opportunities that push them toward higher-level critical thinking from the beginning.

**Dialogue and Transformation**

The second idea that is central to our understanding of critical pedagogy is a commitment to engaging in dialogue with our students in and about the world. This seemed especially meaningful to us as we struggled to resolve the conflict between our wish to be responsive to students and the concrete pres-
sures that institutions of higher education face. Although we acknowledge the tensions of accountability and competition within higher education, we are more strongly driven by our pedagogical beliefs. This requires that we continue to adjust our relationship to institutionally led retention efforts, and the ideas of dialogue and transformation formed an important way of guiding our practice.

Dialogue between students and teachers is particularly important within critical pedagogy; as Freire points out, it is in “reflecting together on what we know and don’t know, we can then act critically to transform reality.” Yet, in order to engage in authentic dialogue, we realize that we must begin by acknowledging each student’s diverse experiences, or what Powell refers to as “radical particulars.” In other words, instead of forcing acculturation, we recognize that we must invite students into dialogue in order to “confirm and legitimate the knowledges and experiences through which students give meaning to their everyday lives.” These ideas focus our attention on understanding and exploring the nuanced dimensions of student growth, including the variations in student goals and needs. They also underscore the reality that one single approach to support will not be suitable for every student, in every context.

In moving the focus of retention from institutional measures of success to student development and from acculturation to adjustment, we also recognize that we needed to think more carefully about the significant number of students who will leave their institution before graduation. In other words, how should we design information literacy learning experiences that are responsive to all learners if we assume that a proportion of students will not stay in higher education? As Powell points out, these questions must force us to “consider the value (in all senses of that word) of our pedagogies and curricula for students who leave.” As we considered these ideas, we realized that, like Ian Beilin, we had to think about success on “two levels,” or in terms of the trajectories and needs of the students who are in our classroom right now, as well as in terms of preparation for future classes. In effect, we were reminded that “our goal should not be to prepare a student to live the life of an intellectual, worker, and citizen, but rather to invite the student to participate now as reader and writer of the world, to recognize that they are currently intellectuals, workers, citizens.” We found that these ideas had direct relevance in the library classroom too.

Conclusion

An image that is often used within higher education is that of an academic pipeline where students embark upon a predefined and fixed journey. Yet,
in reflecting on our own experiences, we realize that we have known many
students whose learning has diverged from this prescribed pathway, either
because they enter college as nontraditional students or because they tempo-
rarily pause education, revising their personal goals. Equally, when academic
learning is understood as a process of acculturation or assimilation, there is
an implication that students must conform to the dominant norms and codes
of the academy in order to successfully complete their journey. However, we
have seen students who are still able to cultivate meaningful participation in
the academy without abandoning their own values and backgrounds.

This essay captures our initial attempts toward balancing student- and in-
stitutional-focused notions of success, but we are far from claiming a particu-
lar stance or specific actions. Instead, we advocate for continued analysis of the
expansive and complex literature on retention, student transitions, and critical
pedagogy—and, as a profession, for the continued alignment of our participa-
tion and programming to student learning and growth. Realizing that this is
a complex topic and that there are many ways of approaching it, we invite the
reader to join us as we continue to pose and investigate—asking

- Whose goals and ideas of success are we fulfilling when we partic-
  ipate in programming? Can we find commonalities between these
goals, or is there only conflict?
- How can we allow space for different ideas of success, especially
  when student goals differ from ours? What practices might we en-
gage in to facilitate our continued dialogue and reflection?
- As educators committed to critical pedagogy, how do we resist the
  simplistic inheritance of external mandates, especially if they conflict
  with our pedagogies, practices, and beliefs? How do we acknowledge
discourses of power and inequality?
- As researchers and writers, how can we mediate meaning and clarity
  between the points of tension that are expressed by terms such as
  these: completion/growth; acculturation/adjustment; retention/trans-
  sition; integration/participation?

Dwelling in these questions is difficult, both due to the recognition that
librarians may have little influence over institutional priorities and goals and
because it can be tough or unpopular to critically interrogate retention strat-
egies that are designed to help students. Wrestling with these competing ideas,
however, we remember that a “liberating teacher is not doing something to the
students but with the students,” an idea that reminds us that it must always
be students and their learning, rather than retention, that directs our efforts.
In other words, while these questions are complex, if we believe in the trans-
formative potential of critical pedagogy, as well as the idea that librarians can
serve the higher ideals of education, rather than just the “institutions’ imme-
diate needs,” then they are also the questions that we should be asking when
we think about retention. The idea of the liberating teacher further reminds us that we must continue to invite student participation or voice as we think about how to approach retention initiatives, as well as inspiring students to continue posing questions in and about their worlds. This will enable us to gather a sense of the complexity and the diversity of the student experience as well as to shift our objectives from an exclusive focus on chronologically driven academic pathways to what is meaningful for students with whom we are learning right now. It will also help us to remain committed to supporting what is best for students and for their learning.

Notes
5. Powell, Retention and Resistance, 33.
7. Powell, Retention and Resistance, 22.

10. Tinto, “From Theory to Action.”


19. Sharon Crowley, “Composition’s Ethic of Service, the Universal Requirement, and the

Bibliography


