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Micro-strategies: Small Steps Toward Improved Retention

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Abstract

Learning communities provide an excellent venue for the practice of micro-strategies, intentional efforts aimed at making a difference for a small number of students. Building micro-strategies into the structure of learning communities can help an institution attain a valuable uptick in retention. Equally important, a shared focus on the use of micro-strategies in learning communities creates a generative framework for discussing teaching and learning among faculty and staff. A representative list of micro-strategies is provided along with likely results.

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Micro-strategies: Small Steps Toward Improved Retention

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Learning communities provide an excellent venue for the practice of “micro-strategies” for improving retention. These are strategies that can be practiced by faculty and staff who prefer to focus on the pedagogical value of the learning community structure but are nonetheless aware of most institutions’ desire to improve retention of all students. Taken singly, micro-strategies may not seem to add significantly to retention, but when built into the structures of multiple learning communities, can help an institution attain a valuable uptick in its overall retention rate. They can also improve the day-to-day teaching and learning experience of the learning community itself by enhancing instructors’ focus on behaviors that contribute to a student’s sense of connection within the community.

One of the proven benefits of learning communities within large universities is the creation of small environments where all those involved can feel a stronger investment and a greater sense of efficacy in the processes of teaching and learning (Shapiro and Levine, 1999). Learning communities have also proven their worth in terms of retention and performance of students on multiple campuses; Iowa State University, the University of Northern Colorado, Indiana State University and others have all demonstrated the retention value of learning communities (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 2004). Few institutional goals are

more important to colleges and universities than the retention of students, and so learning communities have become an increasingly popular structure, both promoting a more meaningful environment for participants and increasing student persistence.

The growth of enrollment management and retention services as areas of focus in higher education exploded in the 1990s and early 2000s (Tinto, 1998). Data collection that helps institutions understand who is leaving and why has led to the creation of policies and programs designed to inch retention rates upward, which many colleges and universities successfully implemented. Some initiatives are costly in dollars: smaller classes and more financial aid. Some are costly in personnel expectations: adding responsibilities to already-stretched professionals. But institutions can justify the costs when retention rates improve. Retaining three, four, or five percent more students at a large university can translate into millions of additional dollars in tuition and fees and reduced costs in recruitment as fewer classroom seats and residence hall beds need to be filled by first-year students.

A decade of such improvement, however, has left many institutions with retention rates close to or at what they consider optimal, taking into consideration their student profile and mission. For elite institutions, first-year-to-second-year retention rates in the 90s are common and expected. For selective institutions recruiting a more diverse and less academically elite student population, rates in the 80s are a reasonable goal. Institutions with more open admissions policies and a more non-traditional student population might feel comfortable with a rate in the 60s or 70s. While few institutions would ever say they would not want a higher rate of retention than what they have, many have, after significant investments in programs and personnel, achieved a rate of retention that would likely improve only minimally with costly changes on campus (ACT, 2004).

It then becomes an institution's goal to maintain its retention rate, perhaps with fractional increases each year that provide the institution with a buffer against a drop caused by factors beyond the institution's control. Such fractional increases represent just a few students making the decision to stay enrolled. For example, at a public institution of 12,000 students (an approximate freshman class of 3500) with an annual tuition/fee cost of \$15,000, a first-year-to-second-year retention rate that improves from 85 percent to 85.3 percent represents a difference of ten students who remain enrolled. If those ten students persist at the institution's 5- or 6-year graduation rate (assuming such a rate is 75 percent), those ten students represent potential revenue of more than \$300,000.

But revenue is not, of course, the only benefit of retention. Institutions with higher retention rates derive other benefits from student persistence, including increased student involvement throughout their college career, a factor that can positively impact the quality of student life; more invested and loyal students in the upperclass ranks improve the quality of student organizations and residential life. Students who are retained through graduation are more likely to be loyal and generous alumni, helping to assure continued institutional success.

Too often, though, faculty and staff tend to leave retention efforts up to senior administrators, those who are seen as having the resources and influence necessary to make sweeping policy changes. But sweeping policy changes and increased spending will not make a huge difference for those institutions that are close to an optimal retention rate. Instead, these institutions can benefit from “micro-strategies,” small efforts, intentional in nature, that make a difference for a few students at a time. On their own, micro-strategies may seem inconsequential, perhaps keeping one, two, or three students enrolled. But as a more comprehensive effort, micro-strategies can keep an institution’s retention rate a point or more higher than it might have been, resulting in a necessary cushion in hard times as well as a slightly increased revenue stream.

Micro-strategies also have the added benefit of involving faculty and staff in retention efforts in ways that matter to them more than just an uptick in a percentage rate. When encouraged to implement micro-strategies, which are often those same things committed faculty and staff do to help students, in the name of retention, those same faculty and staff are able to reframe their positive efforts as part of an institution-wide commitment to excellent service.

Learning communities are ideal venues for micro-strategies, as there is already an implied “smallness” inherent in the structure. Learning communities tend to be structures that link two or more small classes or that break down a large class into small subgroups that are then linked in some fashion with another class or residence hall cohort. One of the greatest benefits of learning communities is their size, which allows for greater faculty-student interaction (MacGregor, Smith, Matthews, and Gabelnick, 1997). Faculty and staff who are involved with learning communities often have expectations of increased interaction and awareness of students. Framing their activities and commitment in terms of retention may be of less interest to them than the pedagogical benefits that learning communities often have, because they may see retention as being outside their role as instructors. But encouraging retention micro-

strategies is often just a reframing that is completely consistent with their own expectations of involvement, and thus such encouragement can often lead to increased willingness on their part to engage in micro-strategies aimed at retention.

The use of micro-strategies as a tool for significantly improving retention depends on the breadth of an institution's learning communities initiative itself. When micro-strategies are implemented in learning communities initiatives that are themselves small in proportion to the overall size of the institution, their impact will, of course, be proportionately small. But when implemented within a more extensive learning communities initiative, they are able to make a significant difference institution-wide.

Watauga College is a residential college at Appalachian State University, a selective public institution that is part of the 16-member University of North Carolina system. Founded in 1972, Watauga College allows approximately 120 freshmen to enroll in an interdisciplinary curriculum that fulfills general education requirements in small, discussion-oriented classes. Students complete a total of 24 semester hours, or the equivalent of eight classes, during their first and second years, and then may choose almost any academic program to complete their education. For much of its more recent history, Watauga's retention rate from first to second year was at or below the retention rate of the overall Appalachian freshman class (of between 2500 and 3500 students, a steady increase over a period of 10 years of significant growth for the university). Its size and the commitment of its faculty made Watauga an excellent laboratory for micro-strategies. Beginning in 2001 and employed over four years, these efforts improved Watauga's first-to-second-year retention rate significantly, surpassing the university's retention rate (Appalachian State University, 2005). Each of these micro-strategies may have made a difference for one or two students in the course of a year, but as a comprehensive effort, they precipitated an important upturn in retention for a program that previously had a dearth of data to support its value.

The chart below describes some of these micro-strategies: how they were implemented and their potential impacts. Following the chart are some ways non-residential learning communities might incorporate some of these initiatives.

Micro-strategy	Likely result
Peer Academic Advisors: Recruit academically successful students and train them to offer first-line advising (e.g., "Is it okay to take three classes back-to-back?").	Gives successful students a better understanding of the system in which their own advising happens as well as a sense of responsibility for other students' decisions.
Enforced academic standards: The "Tough Love" policy is a minimum GPA students must maintain to stay in the program. Explain this at the start of the semester and let them know how many students were lost the previous year due to this policy. Solicit information from faculty about students in danger at mid-term and then meet with students to devise a plan (or encourage them to leave if they don't want to improve).	Students respond when reminded of Tough Love -- know that it's taken seriously. Those in trouble often tell their friends, who then may offer assistance. Also, marginalizes those students who decide not to prioritize academics and hurt others' performance in the process (students often know when others have gotten the "Tough Love" talk), and this improves the climate for academic seriousness.
In-house community service: Students who violate community standards (first-time alcohol, noise, minor destruction of property) are assigned hours during which they work under the supervision of the custodial staff to do general tasks such as sweep the grounds, scrub graffiti, or wash public space windows.	Places the "conversation" of what it means to be a responsible community member within the community itself. Gives students increased sense of ownership over the space and willingness to care for it. Demonstrates to other students the connection between behavior, community, and outcome.
In-house judicial process: Students who violate community standards participate in peer accountability sessions ("truth circles") to determine level of responsibility and appropriate sanction. Faculty members participate in these.	Students meet one another in a different context, take responsibility for one another, and must answer to one another for choices they have made. Creates stronger relationships among Watauga community members and faculty.
Student involvement on committees and other campus activities: Other campus groups and offices often seek student participants or nominations (Student Ambassadors, orientation leaders, resident assistants, peer educators, student government representatives). Watauga faculty and staff consistently nominate community members and encourage them to apply/join.	Increases level of involvement by students in campus life, a predictor of retention and improved academic performance. Improves image of program by keeping students in high visibility positions (especially around recruiting and academic programs like Summer Reading Program and peer tutoring). Helps students articulate to outsiders their views on Watauga College, which strengthens their own commitment.

Micro-strategy	Likely result
<p>Weekly meetings among faculty and staff: Watauga core faculty and the director of the residence hall meet weekly to update each other on academic progress and social, emotional, and/or health problems manifesting in the living environment.</p>	<p>Both faculty and program administrators get a more well-rounded sense of students as individuals. Faculty become aware of how academic work is impacted by social choices the student is making and/or interpersonal concerns; likewise, residence hall staff can intervene when a student is in academic difficulty by providing support and encouragement.</p>
<p>In-house writing center: Student-run peer-tutoring center specializing in writing operates two evenings a week.</p>	<p>Peer consultants gain experience tutoring and improve their own communication and writing skills; students gain academic support and encouragement from their peers. A greater sense of community and responsibility for the whole is cultivated.</p>
<p>Cultural events: As part of the core curriculum students attend several cultural events on campus each semester, often with faculty.</p>	<p>Students engage with the larger campus community, develop a stronger sense of their own community by participating with others in events they may not choose to go to on their own, and faculty and students forge bonds outside the classroom.</p>
<p>Service-learning: Several Watauga courses have a service-learning component in which specific pedagogical goals are integrated with community service.</p>	<p>Students develop ties with the local community through increased awareness of local issues, deepen their engagement with class material, and strengthen skills such as reflection, leadership, communication, and time-management.</p>
<p>Faculty-student collaboration on academic projects: Collaboration with faculty on research projects is strongly encouraged, especially in the capstone Watauga College course, and often students share their results at the university-wide Undergraduate Research Day.</p>	<p>Ties between faculty and students are strengthened, faculty members may gain new perspective on their work, and students gain mentors and experience outside the classroom. Public display of faculty-student collaboration raises the program's profile.</p>

This list of micro-strategies is by no means exhaustive, and several are applicable only to residential learning communities. Others, however, may be adapted in creative ways by faculty who are teaching in non-residential linked courses. For instance, faculty could invite a successful upper-class student to serve as a peer leader or mentor for first-year learning community students; the upper-class student could offer study help, review sessions, or advice at key points in the semester, and s/he could arrange out-of-class activities related to course material. This student could be given academic credit for participating in the class or could be encouraged to see his or her participation as valuable resume-building experience.

Faculty teaching in non-residential learning communities can easily build cultural events, service-learning opportunities, and faculty-student collaborative research into their syllabi. Often it is not hard to find free events on campus that connect to classroom material; attending such events as a group -- faculty and students together -- provides a nice opportunity for out-of-class bonding and frequently offers a great conversation-starter for the next class meeting. Service-learning also encourages students to bond both with each other and the local community; faculty teaching linked courses could develop a service project that highlights goals that the two classes share and allow the students to receive credit in both classes for their work on the project. For example, a linked freshman seminar and English composition class could create a newsletter for a local non-profit agency. Providing students multiple opportunities to see that learning occurs best in community will encourage them to connect with each other not just in the conventional 50 minutes/three times a week way. And students who are connected to each other, to the campus, and to the local community are more likely both to remain committed to their education and to flourish.

Faculty members benefit as well from these micro-strategies. Successful, engaged students are easier to teach than students who are disaffected, bored, or unmotivated. Faculty in learning communities can experiment with micro-strategies to invigorate stale teaching, especially in service courses. One of the rewards for faculty who choose to teach in learning communities is working with colleagues from around campus with whom they may otherwise have little occasion to interact; these partnerships may blossom into other team-teaching experiments, research, presentation and publication opportunities, or unlikely friendships. Coming up with micro-strategies to complement already-proven teaching techniques that each already possesses can be an excellent starting point for such relationships. Further, a highly functional, mutually-supportive classroom community in which the instructor is a partner (if not always an equal partner) models

and reinforces expectations for behavior in other settings, and so the benefits extend to other classrooms and campus arenas.

The benefits of framing important learning community efforts as “micro-strategies” are clear: faculty feel empowered as contributors to an institutional goal, and their commitment to students is noted and rewarded. Some of these efforts also promote better communication among faculty, which can improve their morale as well as their retention. When micro-strategies within learning communities are adopted as a campus approach, they can improve retention in small and gradual ways, but ways that are more immune to campus financial crises and other retention threats. Lastly, micro-strategies not only help keep students enrolled; they also have the potential to increase student engagement through the relationships with faculty and other students that are fostered in these activities, improving the overall learning experience.

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