Encouraging Student Retention: a study of student retention practices

Chris McCarthy
School of Computing
Christchurch Polytechnic
Institute of Technology
mccarthycm@cpit.ac.nz

Tinto (2002) asks what would it mean for institutions to take student retention seriously? For CPIT, it took the harsh realities of budgeting EFTS for 2004. We had always seen it as an adult student problem – the students were adults: if they chose to leave it was their business. Now, at budget preparation time, when we saw the retention of our 2003 mid-year intake was 60%, we realised it wasn't a student problem – it was our problem. We had found what it would mean to take student retention seriously.

Keywords:
Retention, student, tertiary, study

1. INTRODUCTION

Students come and students go. You can't tell when they apply, that even though they meet the entry criteria, they are not going to be there at the end of the course. Students don't come to classes, students don't participate in learning, and students even drop out completely. So far, we had always seen it as an adult student problem. If students chose to not attend class, if students chose to not do the work, and even if they chose to drop out, they were adults; whatever they did it was their business.

However, when it came time in September 2003 to prepare the EFTS budget for 2004, we realised it wasn't a student problem – it was our problem. When we saw that the retention of our 2003 mid-year intake was as low as 60%, we realised we needed to take the issue of student retention seriously (Tinto, 2002).

2. METHODOLOGY

Literature relating to the issue of student retention was reviewed, analysed and summarised. From this it became obvious that the issue was world-wide and we were not alone in experiencing these issues. Many other tertiary institutions around the world were examining the same problems – and many of them were trying to do something about these issues.

A search was done of some of these institutions and interviews were arranged with Programme Leaders or Heads of Schools within their equivalent to our School of Computing. Criteria exercised in selecting these institutions included such matters as being an inner-city campus, servicing a similar student market, with a School of Computing (or equivalent) offering two-year diploma (or associate degree) and bachelor degree programmes.

Institutions interviewed were the British Columbia Institute of Technology, the San Diego City College, the New York City College of Technology, and the Cork Institute of Technology.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is cold comfort that CPIT's retention rate is better than the national average. Scott (2004) reports that an estimated 40% of domestic students who started a 3-year qualification in 1998 had completed it after five years and 51% left without completing it within the five years.

Scott further reports that retention and completion rates by qualification level improve the higher the level studied. Certificate completion rates are the lowest of any level studied but may in part re-

flect the differing academic abilities of students at these different levels. He found that a number of students starting a certificate ended up transferring to and completing a diploma or degree.

Not only is CPIT better than the national average, the national average itself is better than Australia (42% graduating), Britain (37% graduating) and the OECD mean (30%). In the United States 51% will graduate within six years (Tinto, 2002).

(This US figure is biased by the 90% graduation rate achieved by the likes of Harvard and Princeton, the 80% graduation from UCLA and Virginia and Michigan. Many open-enrolment universities, such as those in the large cities, graduate less than 30% of their students. (Tinto, 2002))

While Scott's report is the first New Zealand based research into actual retention figures, New Zealanders have been reporting on the issues involved since as early as 1997 when Boddy, G. & Neale, J. of the Auckland Institute of Technology presented a paper at the First Year Experience in Tertiary Education Conference held that year in Auckland.

There have been several reports over the years (Unitec 2001), but not until Billings (2002) did we see some practical suggestions to resolve the student retention issue. Billings reported that strategies at programme and course level would be a proactive approach to identifying and supporting at risk students at the earliest possible opportunity.

Billings went on to suggest identifying at-risk students, having a retention system within the enrolment service, faculty retention reports that examined the success and failure rates, and identifying areas of student satisfaction and dissatisfaction. She further suggested having exit interviews, mentoring programmes, peer counselling, study groups, and workshops.

One of her more adventurous suggestions was to have a targeting programme where staff meet with students on a regular basis to discuss their study and self-management skills.

Tinto, who could be called the father of student retention, began writing on this issue as far back as 1975 when he first published his research into what has become known as (Morley, 2004) "the need for students to fit in" to the institution – in this case a four-year residential institution.

By 2002 Tinto is still reporting on student retention, and the issues that cause student "dropout". Tinto is now saying that the single most important issue is clearly that of institutional commitment – institutions that are committed to the goal of increasing student retention seem to find a way to achieve it. However, it must be supported by the willingness to invest the resources and provide the incentives and rewards necessary to enhance student retention. Another important factor, according to Tinto, is the expectation of student success - "no student rises to low expectations".

Tinto also suggests, in a similar manner to Billings (2002) and others, that student support is also vital to retention and success. He says there are two types of support – academic and social. By academic support he means effective tutoring (workshops, etc), study groups, and supplemental instruction when and where needed. By social support he means counselling, mentoring, and ethnic student centres.

(In a time of ever-increasing international student numbers Tinto claims that these ethnic student centres provide a "safe haven" for those who find themselves out of place in a setting where they are the minority. These centres can also serve as "secure, knowable ports of entry" for new international students.)

There has been a wealth of material written about student retention over the years, much it presented as either bibliographies (Bates, 2001) or literature reviews (Cook, 2000) as examples. There have also been conferences and seminars on the issue, one of the most recent being held in 2003 at Jackson Community College, Kentucky. Representatives from several state universities attended and some 63 ideas were developed and released as a guideline for others to follow (Honolulu Community College, 2004).

Included in the 63 ideas are basic student-centred teaching tips such as learning and using the names of your students as quickly as possible and giving feedback, to again student-centred classroom management techniques as list and discuss your course objectives in the first class and return tests and assignments as quickly as possible.

Other suggestions are somewhat more radical such as having students read one another's assignments before turning them in to help them find er-

rors before being marked, and setting up special tutoring sessions and extra classes with mandatory attendance.

4. FINDINGS

The literature review uncovered a wide range of practices. Some of the key ones were:

- Identifying at-risk students
- Recording success and failure rates (statistical)
- Having exit interviews and exit surveys
- Peer counselling
- Study groups
- Mentoring programmes
- Staff meeting with students regularly to discuss goals and progress
- Being more student-centred and student-focused
- Returning assessment material as quickly as possible
- Giving feedback to students.

Results from the interviews conducted with the Programme Leaders or Heads of Schools at the various overseas institutions were also highly informative.

Bill Howarth, Programme Head, Diploma in Computer Systems Technology, in the School of Computing and Academic Studies at the British Columbia Institute of Technology, reported that they have :

Each member of academic staff being responsible for a group of 23 students –called a "set" to cover student interviews, attendance, referral for counselling, learning support, tutorial sessions, workshops, etc

- The "Master/Learner" scheme – where staff and students are involved in a compulsory recreation course each week
- Part time programmes (not just courses, but whole programme that can be done part time) – for example the DipCST taking 3 or 4 years instead of 2 - students can come one day a week or two evenings a week, or what ever the programme structure is
- A strong emphasis on exit interview for withdrawing student
- As much credit as possible for what was done at school
- A high level of involvement with local high schools.

Professor Richard Pelletier, Department Chair, Computer Information Systems and Programme Head for the Associate Degrees in Computer Science, at the San Diego City College, reported that they have:

- Students being emailed if they miss a class
- Students being emailed their results and any other information to give a sense of involvement and contact by way of email
- All students being required to have email – their own ones (not provided by the institution) as they are more likely to read the email
- A greater emphasis on courses being offered on-line (not instead of classroom, but as well as) to help students have access to part time study
- As much credit as possible for what is done elsewhere (school or other institution)
- A high level of involvement with schools – helping to develop the curriculum and advising on ICT matters - visits to schools are done by all staff members, not just the Programme Leader.

Professor Russell Griemsmann, Chair of Computer Systems Technology at the New York City College of Technology, reported they have:

- A greater credit for work done at school before arriving
- Special labs just for remedial work – have to have special permission to be there
- A scheme for employing senior students as technical consultants for computing students (employed for up to 20 hours per week) – and students get credit towards a paper for it
- Students being employed in administrative roles (clerical, school visits, career expo stalls, etc) up to 20 hours per week and they get credit for it
- Staff being required to do "office time" – six hours per week (a minimum of two hours per day for three of the five days)
- Staff being responsible for a group of students (in NYCC's case up to 90 students each staff member).

Tadhg Leane, the then-Programme Leader of the National Diploma in Computing (3 years) in the Department of Mathematics and Computing at The Cork Institute of Technology reported that they have:

- Given as much credit as possible for work done before arriving (especially work done at Private Providers)
- Remedial study programmes (from learning support services) but Computing staff take the remedial courses for additional pay
- Close mentoring of students by staff (mostly at subject teacher level) and suggestions made to downgrade to another computing qualification or to transfer to another programme within the institution
- Interviewed by subject co-ordinator if poor performance within a subject
- Should poor performance continue, the student is written to and asked to call on the year co-ordinator so that student can be counselled and tracked.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Student retention is something that affects us all, all over the world. Much is being written about the topic but also many practical things are being suggested and some are even being put in place. Many of the practical suggestions are common sense in the student-focussed area, and many are just good basic classroom teaching and management practices.

Many more are quite radical and tend to revolve around greater access for the student – greater access to courses, information, and staff. The emphasis on greater student access is seen in courses within programmes being offered on a formal part time timetable pattern, in more and faster feedback to students and in staff being responsible for and accessible to the students with office time, workshops, tutorials, and remedial classes.

From the statistics being quoted, the material being written to argue the issues, and the practical suggestions being offered, it is time to take the issue of student retention seriously. We need to realise that the basis of retention lies not only in our students "but also in the very character of the settings" in which we ask our students to learn (Tinto 2002).

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all the people I interviewed for the patience and hospitality they showed to us. I addition I would like to thank Ken Takagaki, Dean of the School of Computing and Academic Studies, British Columbia Institute of Technology, and Marilyn Morrison, Co-ordinator of the Weekend College, New York City College of Technology for the additional support they gave.

Part of this research was possible with a Study Travel Award from CPIT in 2002.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank Diane McCarthy for her unfailing support as research assistant and expert taker of notes, enabling me to concentrate on the interview process and follow wherever the answers to questions led.

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