

Student Success or Student Non-Dissatisfaction?

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This article appeared in *Growth Journal* (Spring 2006) in an edited form and is used here with permission. The essence of this article served as the background for numerous conference and campus presentations, is reflected in Jerry’s “Forward” to Tracy L. Skipper’s text, *Student Development in the First College Year: A Primer for College Educators* (2005, National Resource Center, ISBN-13 978-1-889271-52-1), and is the fulcrum of Jerry’s texts *The Purpose-Guided Student* and *Why I Teach* (McGraw-Hill). These notions also frame the lead chapter in *Helping Sophomores Succeed* (Jossey Bass)—co-authored with John Gardner, Mary Stuart Hunter, Scott Evenbeck, Barbara Tobolowsky, Laurie Schreiner and Molly Schaller.

INTRODUCTION:

IS SOMETHING AWRY IN WANTING SATISFIED STUDENTS?

The majority of *student success* programs are actually programs of *student non-dissatisfaction*. Addressing student dissatisfaction may nudge retention rates a bit higher, but this approach targets second-rate causes of student attrition.

Campuses that begin their retention efforts with student satisfaction surveys often focus on areas of dissatisfaction—aspects of the college experience rarely tied to student motivation. Therein is the main problem facing many well-oiled student success efforts. *The removal of dissatisfaction neither guarantees satisfaction nor addresses motivation*—an observation popularized by psychologist Frederick Herzberg (1991/2005).

Motivated students are more likely to succeed. Before turning to statistics and current research, let’s frame the discussion with reference to the well publicized story of Jamie Escalante. The 1988 movie, *Stand and Deliver*, represents well this true story of student motivation. Inner-Los Angeles Hispanic students passed the AP Calculus exam amidst deplorable learning conditions. Student satisfaction surveys would likely have shown rampant dissatisfaction with Garfield’s learning environment—yet an entire group of students succeeded.

During visits to the Escalantes in 1989 I noticed domino-like stacks of awards leaning against the wall in a side room. I’ve subsequently listened on numerous occasions as the academe applauded Jamie. Likewise, a host of curricula cite his story (e.g, Ellis/2005). However, the majority of colleges still fail to follow his lead—to put *motivation* at the center of student success efforts. What appears to be common sense is problematic in

measuring and implementing, and thus the rub. But current programs like the *Knowledge is Power Program* (KIPP) at the K-12 level, and J. Herman Blake's work among colleges remind us of the phenomenal impact of structured motivation (Fiske, 2004).

At Indiana Wesleyan University (IWU) motivation is linked to a search for one's purpose or life calling. IWU's *purpose-guide* approach to student success has led to 12% increases in both retention and four-year graduation rates since 1998. These efforts are anchored in the fulcrum of the general education curriculum—the first-year course, “Becoming World Changers: Christianity and Contemporary Issues (UNV180).” A current study between IWU and Indiana University corroborated these findings (Pattengale/2005, “Purpose-guided”). Students who took an additional course for undeclared students, the Life Calling (LDR150), were “six times more likely to have an earned degree at the end of four years than those who did not take the class,” and were “17 times more likely to remain enrolled rather than withdraw after four years if they had not completed their degree.” (Millard, Reynolds, and McKinney/2005) These conclusions are based on 5,000-6,000 cases in the between-year persistence models and 1,748 cases in the longitudinal study.

At IWU it's not a focus on motivation is not an either-or proposition. That is, focusing on motivation does not negate the need to look at student perceptions or diminish the need to improve the learning environment, which Jamie fought tirelessly for as well. At issue, however, is the need to position the student's core as the primary focus of helping students to succeed. To stir their interest in causes greater than themselves.

A UCLA study revealed that students are more bored after the first year of college than when they arrived (Gardner/2002). Common sense begs the question, “Are they more at-risk without complaints or without interest?” Also, a school's definition of “at-risk” students usually indicates whether its retention strategy will focus on obstacles and environmental issues, or on those tied to the student's core—to areas linked more closely to intrinsic motivation.

In the following discussion we will look at evidence of institutions' preoccupation with dissatisfied students. We will note emerging differences in student success theories, and then consider some suggestions to utilize varying approaches in student success strategies. In the end, I suggest a purpose-guided approach to student success. While student development theories abound, as aptly represented in Tracy Skipper's new primer (2005), tenable student success strategies cross academic lines and considerations as well. Student success has correlations with pre-college experiences (Trusty & Niles, 2004), campus engagement (Kuh, 2005), experiential learning (Zlotkowski) and a host of other factors. Most importantly, this article argues that student success strategies should link to ultimate questions—to questions of life purpose.

Strong correlations at Indiana Wesleyan University between persistence and purpose-guided programs have shown sustained success in both overall programming and courses in particular.

This article begs the key question: “Does your institution’s student success program focus on student dissatisfaction, or on student motivation?” The suggested resolve is not an either-or answer, but one of priority on the latter.

A Look at Student Non-Dissatisfaction

An Office of Student “Non-dissatisfaction” is more than play on words. Many institutions focus their main student retention efforts on areas where students indicate dissatisfaction with the institution.

This *Non-dissatisfaction approach* follows a simple formula—give student satisfaction surveys, quantify the results, qualify them through focus group follow-up sessions, then address the specific areas of dissatisfaction. The overarching theory is to remove dissatisfied areas in order to retain students to graduation.

Assessment tools are chosen that identify these areas of dissatisfaction. By implication, the most at-risk students are the most dissatisfied. The 2002 “ACT Survey Services” brochure contained advertisements for 17 major student surveys, some approaching their third decade of normed studies. One of the two charts in this brochure highlights student satisfaction with “College Environment—Facilities.” Among the ACT’s newest tools is the *Survey of Student Opinions*, still relatively young in its testing. The description sounds similar to that of other satisfaction surveys, “Assesses students’ perceptions of the importance of, and satisfaction with, a full range of programs, services, and environmental factors at the college they are attending.”

The proliferation of these helpful surveys has prompted the need for objective centers, such as The Policy Center on the First Year of College—located at Brevard College (North Carolina). Randy Swing, the Center’s co-director, has edited helpful monographs attempting to keep current with these tools, i.e., *Proving and Improving: Strategies for Assessing the First College Year* (2002, 2005).

Numerous scholars champion student satisfaction surveys. Lee Upcraft and John Schuh list “student satisfaction” among the eight key components of a successful assessment of first year programs (1996). They state,

A Third Component is assessing first-year student satisfaction, which is the cornerstone of maintaining and improving the quality of services and programs targeted to first-year students. . . . If students are dissatisfied, they will not reuse

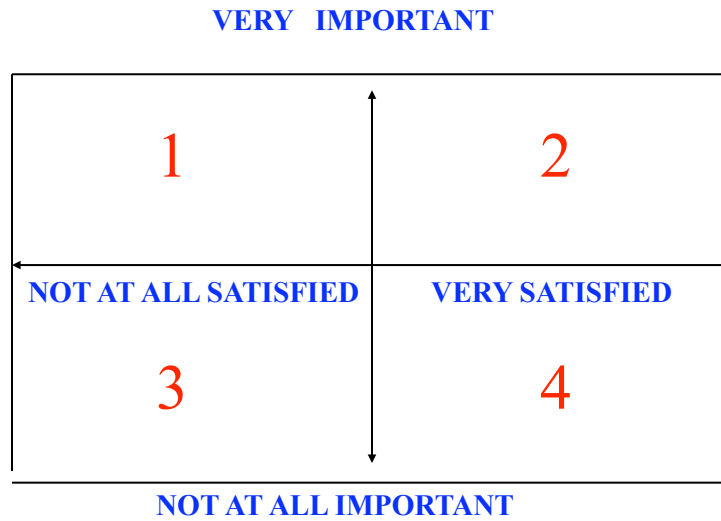
what we offer, and they will not recommend our services and programs to other students. (Upcraft/Schuh, 2001, p. 9).

My survey of over 400 universities indicates that most institutions concur with Upcraft and Schuh's "cornerstone" notion—which necessitates surveys and corresponding programs to correct areas of dissatisfaction. From 1999 through 2002, I surveyed over twenty conference audiences scattered throughout the United States. More than 95% of the respondents indicated an overwhelming preoccupation with areas of dissatisfaction in their retention efforts. Focus (or "priority") was determined by financial and human resources expended on interventions and/or preventions during the previous five years at that institution.

Another indicator of large numbers of institutions with the non-dissatisfaction emphasis is not only the proliferation of student satisfaction survey instruments, but their actual employment. The ACT's data sets reveal this (see its website). The *College Outcomes Survey* alone was used with 72,000 students at 140 institutions between 1996 and 2000. Also, over 1400 universities have used Noel-Levitz's *Student Satisfaction Inventory* (SSI).

The SSI's co-developer, Laurie Schreiner, teamed with me for a text on sophomores, *Visible Solutions for Invisible Students: Helping Sophomores Succeed* (Schreiner/Pattengale, 2000). Throughout our text are important insights into the millennial students' perception of college life—made possible through her nationally-normed instrument.

Institutions use the below diagram in interpreting the SSI results. Quadrant "1" becomes the area of greatest concern for the Student Success committees.



The rationale is simple. If a significant cohort of students rates one of the 73 items as extremely important, and they are extremely dissatisfied in their perception of that aspect of campus, there’s a major problem that should receive priority treatment—or as Upcraft and Schuh warn, “. . . they will not reuse what we offer.” Like the ACT’s *Survey of Student Opinions*, these answers generate various grids and charts for Student Success committees. *Or, depending on how the data is used, for Student Non-Dissatisfaction committees.*

Three aspects of the SSI study have considerable bearing on the current discussion. 1) Students perceive content as very important. 2) Content is rarely addressed in student success studies and strategies because it’s not among Quadrant 1 items. And, 3) the theory assumes that by removing the dissatisfaction the students will become more satisfied. In turn, goes the theory, a more satisfied student is more likely to be a successful student.

Among the top five “Issues of Importance” for students nationwide, according to the SSI, three directly relate to content. In a study of 23,848 sophomores (1998-99), this tool revealed the following ranking of these issues for public and private schools, and the rankings are very similar to studies of over 100,000 students from all grade levels:

SSI Item	Private University Importance Ranking	Public University Importance Ranking
The content of courses within my major is valuable	1	1
The instruction in my field is excellent	2	3

Nearly all of the faculty are knowledgeable in their field.	3	4
The quality of instruction I receive in most of my classes is excellent	4	6

This information reveals that students perceive content to be the most important among dozens of choices. It's ironic that very few student success initiatives are tied to the content itself. In my study, less than 5% of respondents from over 400 universities indicated "Academic Content" as the key focus of their student success programs.

Although there are innumerable possibilities for this disconnection, it seems to reflect the lack of faculty involvement during the incipient stages (at the university level) of student success planning. This also reflects focus group follow-up discussions.

Concomitantly, another factor is the student development staff's lack of purview in content areas. One of the foremost authorities on student success, Vincent Tinto, challenges us to focus on educating students, on attending to both the social and cognitive areas, "not just to focus on how do we keep them." (Tinto/99). John Braxton has produced an important reassessment of this model (2000).

Student success offices should be aware of student perceptions. However, while student satisfaction surveys are effective in identifying areas in which students are dissatisfied with an institution, it is misleading to assume that removing these dissatisfactions is the best way to improve student retention.

Contrary Voices: Satisfaction is Secondary

Students are most at-risk when they have no clear understanding of the relevance of college to life after or outside of college. It is important to help alleviate obstacles to educational pursuits, and to address areas of dissatisfaction. However, as noted in *The Motivated Student: The Dream Needs To Be Stronger than the Struggle*, a fundamental objective should be for students to learn about their values and develop a sense of purpose (Pattengale/2006 and Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward/2005). In turn, this sense of direction will overshadow dissatisfactions and help to sustain them in their challenges. This notion is similar to the maxim of the late Chip Anderson, co-author of Gallup's *StrengthsQuest*, "If the Why is big enough, the How will show up." (Anderson, 1996; 2001)

A battery of popular books reflects this idea of "beginning with the end in mind," as Steven Covey champions in his *Seven Habits for Highly Successful People*. An increasing number of teachers and professors are shoving aside mainstay "student success" curriculum and making room for this Coveyistic genre. Themes throughout the texts of popular writers like John Maxwell, "Dr. Phil" and Parker Palmer imbibe this notion of

“alignment,” or “merging” a person’s core with an articulated life purpose. Likewise, Alfie Kohn’s provocative best-seller, *Punished by Rewards*, candidly chastises educators for focusing on external issues and incentives instead of intrinsic concerns. Denise Clark Pope’s *Doing School* likewise challenges the current educational steps to academic “success” (Yale Press, 2001), a notion also implied in *My Freshman Year*.

The runaway best-seller among student success texts remains *Becoming a Master Student* by David B. Ellis. (Ellis/2000 & 2005) It is used in over 1700 universities. In his polished and ever-expanding skills text, Ellis states, “No matter where they’ve attended school, liberally educated people can state what they’re willing to bet their lives on.” (p. 233) I agree, but imagine students asking, “What types of causes are worthy of my life’s energies?” And, “What is a definition of *worthy*?” Ellis fails to help students answer these questions—central to a student’s core.

If Ellis is correct, and his above characteristic is the key student outcome desired of every liberally educated person, then connections between life passions and persistence in college would appear to be a priority concern. Peter Laurence raises similar questions in his calculated discussion on spirituality in education where he discusses “the realms of meaning and purpose.” (*About Campus*, 1999; p. 15)

Framing a Response

The theoretical framework of psychologist Frederick Herzberg helps to evaluate student success efforts. He states that “the factors leading to job satisfaction are separate and distinct from those that lead to job dissatisfaction.” Herzberg contends that

. . . the opposite of ‘Satisfaction’ is ‘No Satisfaction,’ and the opposite of ‘Dissatisfaction’ is ‘No Dissatisfaction’ . . . to eliminate factors that create job dissatisfaction can bring about peace, but not necessarily motivation.

In the college context, his theory would imply that if you eliminate the negative environmental aspects of students’ educational experiences you cannot claim that you’ve motivated them. While there is strong support that addressing many of these environmental issues correlates with a better retention rate, this is not the same as increased internal motivation.

Educators have expressed a reluctance to build student success programs accordingly. It’s much easier to survey tangible issues—those normally highlighted in satisfaction surveys. However, purpose-guided education is not a new idea. Goal theorists have long postulated a causal relationship between a student’s goal orientation and behavioral responses in college (Elliot & Dweck, 1988).

Noel Entwistle (University of Edinburgh) challenged educators to highlight the “big picture” approach in his keynote address to the American Association for Higher Education Assessment Conference (Suskie, 2001). Deeper learning is inextricably linked to clarifying meaning, and relating our past learning and experiences with the present. The voluminous writings of Edward Zlotkowski on service learning point us in the same direction. A good summary is found in *Service-Learning and the First-Year Experience: Preparing Students for Personal Success and Civic Responsibility* (2002). The title itself tips the thesis. Zlotkowski passionately argues that one of the best things we can do to improve student success is to convince students “they can help to improve the human condition.” (Zlotkowski/2002). In other words, it’s not just about building a scaffolding around a student.

Tutors, skills helps, study rooms, new computer labs, midnight classes, learning communities, transition courses, peer mentors, Xeroxing access, in-house convenient stores, transportation services and many other support programs make up the scaffolding. The real problem occurs when the scaffolding is removed and the student has not developed a purpose to continue. Oftentimes, this de-scaffolding takes place in the sophomore year. Much of the scaffolding was constructed due to student satisfaction surveys.

Some Observations about the Dissatisfaction Development

A Relatively Recent Emphasis on Retention: Until the past 30 years, “retention” was far from a priority in higher education. Through the selfless efforts of *The National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition* (FYE), institutions internationally have come to a better understanding of student issues and viable responses. The FYE was chartered in 1986, and yet it’s considered the true veteran and leader in first-year studies. The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA, f. 1979), the American College Personnel Association (ACPA, f. 1924), and other fine organizations have contributed significantly to student success studies. Likewise, Jossey-Bass Publishers, FYE, Houghton Mifflin, McGraw-Hill, Wadsworth, Prentice Hall, ACT and other publishing units have provided helpful curriculum and texts on various aspects of student success. It’s of little surprise that one of Houghton Mifflin’s largest divisions is College Survival.

The Financial Factor: Through the aggressive for-profit marketing efforts of firms like Noel-Levitz, colleges took major strides in addressing student “attrition” (failure to complete a degree in a timely manner). During this new economy, pressure began to mount on college administrators to save millions of dollars due to lost tuition, and for-profits like Noel Levitz’s had ready-made strategies to help address such needs.

In the rush to save the students from leaving, colleges jumped on the bandwagon of behavioral approaches without looking at other options. Many relied on these retention-in-a-box kits. Why not? The tools help administrators and newly formed retention teams to get their arms around measurable problems. And, the results can be compared to hundreds of other schools through normed studies.

Universities should use such tools, and a variety of experts can give advice about which of the dozens of instruments would best fit your school's needs. However, upon a closer look, these tools are limited. They've also contributed to the proliferation of a behavioral bent to student programs—those focusing on improving the environment of education.

Living with Scaffolding and “At-Risk” Designations: Universities have created some remarkable retention scaffolding, that is, interventions and preventions for the “at-risk” students. These schools have crafted various ways to profile their “at-risk” students. However, few institutions reported a priority of helping students to understand why they're in the midst of the scaffolding to begin with. The precursor of this erection of scaffolding was the designation of “at-risk.” Perhaps it's ironic that the federal TRIO programs have one of the simplest definitions for “at-risk.” An at-risk student must meet two of the following criteria 1) first generation, 2) low income, 3) documented disability. However, most universities have other criteria for labeling “at-risk.” And, after all, with a battery of assessments we can ferret out various aspects of a student's profile. With the exception of normed federal terms, “at-risk” becomes relative to the institution or consulting agency. Clemson's program for at-risk agricultural students targets those with 1200 SATs as its at-risk cohort, whereas many schools have campus SAT averages below 1100. Is Harvey Mudd's academic at-risk at 1400? And, is “at-risk” grade dependent?

The Lack of Faculty Involvement: Another interesting development in the campaign to heighten student success efforts is that the banner has been carried in large part by Student Development personnel. The majority of professionals at most student success conferences are non-faculty. Although some key faculty have contributed theoretical works and aids to the student success field, student development personnel continue to dominate retention efforts. During a west coast speaking tour, only two of the seven universities had more than a token faculty presence in the student success workshops—a scenario I have found at dozens of other campus engagements and “academic” conferences.

The 1999 NACADA national conference accented this imbalance of student success support. Former President Buddy Ramoz noted after the awards ceremony, “Jerry, it's always great to have someone from the academic side here.” It startled me to learn that in the National *Academic* Advising Association, only 5% of its 5,600 members (now 6,300) had faculty status. Considering that over 60% of advising is done by faculty, and that advising is a critical part of student success, the numbers reveal a serious disconnect (Pattengale, Forward/2005).

The Proliferation of First-Year Courses: Student Development leaders were left to figure out retention plans that they could implement—outside of the traditional classroom. In time, their efforts became institutionalized and gradually became credit bearing. This proliferation of first-year courses has created an arena ripe for collaboration between the two areas. Liberal arts professors are increasingly implementing experiential learning elements in their courses. It is ironic that this was once a learning approach more closely associated with “extra curricular” events in the student development area. Concurrently, student development personnel are finding their student success seminars and first-year programs among required courses (, Gardner). An institution is a systematic response to a recurring need, and first-year courses are becoming institutionalized.

Professional Performance Standards: South Carolina was among the first of many states to link performance standards to funding lines. With millions of dollars tied directly to an institution’s retention and graduation rates, an assortment of retention plans were jump started nationwide. In some states a phenomenal amount of external funding assisted the cause, such as Indiana’s assistance from The Lilly Endowment and more recently the Lumina Foundation. Against the backdrop of alleged educational woes, many college boards attempted to become proactive and shifted to a business style of managing “the business” of the liberal arts.

WHAT’S NEXT?

Recognize the Wind of Change Blowing us Toward the Student Core

There is a national fascination with books on life direction and fulfillment. Numerous high schools have already endorsed a teen version of *Seven Habits for Highly Successful People*, and you can find many Coveyites among college faculty. “Dr. Phil” and his *Self Matters* claimed spots on the bestseller list, and Phil an Oprah-endorsed talk show. Some colleges utilize Dewitt Jones’ riveting video, *Celebrating All that is Right in Life*. Typical of other work by this National Geographic photographer, it is provocative and packed with captivating scenery behind his query on ultimate questions. The \$600 tag for this 20-minute challenge reflects the supply/demand dynamic on “Why” issues. The same is true of Gallup’s new book and curriculum, *StrengthsQuest*. The corresponding website is robust and Chip Anderson’s ideas are provocative.

We have felt this breeze with lighter books, like Cherie Carter-Scott’s feel-good vacuous pseudo text, *If Life is a Game, These are the Rules*. But some of the more recent texts need to be taken seriously, such as Skip Downing’s handy book on self-esteem, *On Course: Strategies for Creating Success in College and in Life*. Skip comes closer to the question of purpose than most usable texts.

Hold Focus Groups To Discuss Your Institution’s Student Success Philosophy

Consider, if you will, what a shift to an intrinsic focus for programming would look like on your campus. Begin by applauding what has transpired in retention efforts, continue with what is working, but consider some more foundational issues.

Perhaps an analogy will help here. In the late '70s, I showed my golf instructor my bag of shiny Northwesterns—recently polished for the occasion. He smiled, took out one of my *K-Mart* blue-light special and leaned it against the bag. “It’s like this, Jerry,” as he eased into the conversation while looking across the Indiana course, “You can shine up a ’57 Chevy all you want, but it’ll never compete at the Indianapolis 500.”

Colleges have some wonderful programs that are helping students, but they are limited in what they can do. *They focus on the How. We need programs that focus on the Why.*

Discuss the Purpose of Your Assessments.

If you’re interested in a paradigm less concerned with dorm maintenance, cafeteria food, and computer labs and more interested in ultimate questions, then you’ll likely need different assessments. How do you look more at the student’s core? Amidst the battery of multiple-page assessment tools is Charles R. Snyder’s “Hope Scale.” Eight simple questions touch significant aspects of what he terms the student’s “willpower” and “waypower.” At IWU we used “The Hope Scale” in studying the 1999-2000 first-year students (510/583) and a cohort of sophomores (40). The results showed a strong correspondence with another tool, *The College Student Inventory*, in evaluating academic and social motivation predictive of student success. In an objective way, these researchers are noting that *the dream needs to be stronger than the struggle*, or at the least, the stronger the hope of fulfilling a dream, the more likely a college student will remain in school.

Snyder’s two categories help address the student’s core. I suggest another category foundational for the other two, “wantpower,” an aspect of motivation I ferret out elsewhere.

Most programs are built on the behavioristic notion that to remove obstacles and challenges establishes an environment in which students are the most likely to succeed. The results of these programs are indeed positive, and measurable outcomes show student persistence usually increases. However, “most likely” is misleading. It assumes that changing the environment is the best approach. Comparisons are made with other

1 pt. -- Academic Content (foundational facts and/or principles in an academic discipline, e.g., literature, philosophy, history)

1 pt. -- Ultimate Questions (questions of purpose, life meaning and/or value)

2 pts. -- The Learning Process (assisting with learning challenges, introducing creative pedagogy, skill sets, etc.)

2 pts. -- The Learning Environment (dorm, extra-curricular, library, class size, cohort groups, the structure of orientation and/or first-year courses, etc.)

1 pt. responses reflect a student-core approach; 2 pt. responses reflect a scaffolding approach. Universities list their top three student success initiatives in the appropriate categories. If the total score is above 4, a university classifies as taking a scaffolding approach. Also of interest is if the majority of funds for the top three initiatives fall above or below the line.

schools taking the same approach—flagship institutions in the chart of Student Non-dissatisfaction programs.

Redefine Faculty and Add Faculty Titles

There should not be a chasm between student development personnel and faculty. Student Development and Academic Department representatives were among the writers of the study, “Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning.” It serves as a weighty prompting in closing the gap between the two “sides” of campus. Patrick Terenzini notes in his 1999 *About Campus* article “Form Follows Function. Right?” that this study “helps direct our thinking about higher education’s core functions and points the way toward some of the forms by means of which that function might be effectively achieved.” (p. 3) If we apply this same notion to the student success arena, it begs the question of student success’s true function—which are perhaps developed by default more than by design.

There is a shared “faculty” role available to student development personnel—that of “Student Success Faculty.” For example, at IWU we utilize up to 30 student development members as faculty for our first-year course, using 60 faculty overall. It’s the fulcrum of our general education program, and a demanding liberal arts course (three-credits). They receive the designation “World Changers Faculty (WCF),” and are evaluated the same as full professors. (IWU’s motto is “. . . to develop world changers,” reflected in the course title.) WCF are also eligible for the annual teaching awards. This course is based on purposed-guided curriculum and was central in raising retention rates 12%.

Likewise, we founded a Center for Life Calling and Leadership, required all undeclared students, and gave its personnel faculty status. You guessed it—they teach classes on life calling and other “Why” questions.

Besides my administrative role, I am a full professor in Ancient History—about as entrenched in the Humanities as one could be. My last job was directing a research foundation, and assimilating teams of scholars here and at our Herefordshire office (England) to preserve and translate hundreds of texts. When a university asked me to propose a position and title I’d be most interested in, I suggested, “Endowed Chair of Student Success.” The president chuckled and noted the title would lower my profile. He noted, “Are you serious? I’ve never heard of such a thing.” “That is the point, I answered, “There is no such position but there should be.”

Perhaps running through the center of Vincent Tinto’s social and cognitive lines should be a bolder one representing dispositions.

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