

## Book review

Seidman, A. (Ed.). (2005). *College student retention: Formula for student success* (American Council on Education series). Westport CT: Praeger Publishers. (ISBN 0 275 98193 2)

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*College student retention: Formula for student success* is an edited compilation of 12 chapters (including the epilogue) written by a number of authors located in the United States of America. The 333 page book focuses on a range of issues relating to student attrition and retention in higher education, although it is not restricted to problems and practices of that sector.

The book commences with a historical overview of retention, highlighting how this issue has attracted increasing attention and been the focus of considerable research. The early chapters deal with problems and issues relating to defining and measuring attrition. The book then moves on to look at research on reasons for student departure and persistence. Chapter 8 shifts the focus again, introducing a variety of perspectives from which retention can be viewed and researched. The next two chapters introduce the notion that, while institutions have some control over factors that influence students' decisions to persist with their studies, there are also factors outside the control of the institution. Alan Seidman rounds out the chapters with a presentation of his formula for student success. In the epilogue, Vincent Tinto, reflecting on the current debate and extensive research into student retention, suggests that there is still much work to be completed before we understand retention and can develop effective institutional action plans. Interestingly he notes that there has been considerable research into why students leave but limited work on why students remain in the system and graduate.

Given the background of the authors, as might be expected, the book has a North American perspective. The authors draw heavily on US focused research, publications and practice in the articulation of their views.

This aside, the book successfully highlights the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of student attrition and its corollary, retention. It draws attention to the fact that there are models to predict which students might leave, when they might leave and how attrition might be measured but does not include a model that would help us understand why students fail to persist in their studies. The content reinforces that there is an almost endless number of factors that influence a student's decision to leave and that the combinations of issues take a student to the point of withdrawing is unique to each individual.

While limited in its presentation of new knowledge and theory, the book was on occasion successful in leading me to reconsidering some issues. One example was the comment "that admission policies are working well when they yield large numbers of graduates, not large numbers of first year students" (Bean, p. 230). Two issues emerged from this statement. Firstly, as Tinto suggested in his epilogue, there is the need to understand better why students succeed if retention

rates are to be improved. Secondly, the comment directed me to think about the problems of measuring attrition and how the inclusion/exclusion of the number of students transferring to a course with advanced standing, or returning to study after a period of absence, could alter the presentation of attrition rates. Attrition determined on the basis of those who do not return each enrolment period does not acknowledge the legitimacy of students who move in and out of the system and across the sector. It merely presents them as an attrition statistic or new enrolment, which is not necessarily an accurate representation of institutional effectiveness. This issue will become more important as participation rates of mature students increase, and as communication technologies and internationalisation of undergraduate education produce a more mobile population of students. The issue already affects measures of performance at this university (Central Queensland University), which has a large proportion of mature students studying in distance mode, many international students, and where only one quarter of the students are classed as ‘school-leavers’, that is, they entered university within two years of completing high school.

For those new to this field of study, the book is a useful introduction to the topic. However, while presenting a useful account of the current situation in the field (particularly in the US), the experienced practitioner may find it lacking as, apart from the Seidman “Formula for student success” and the Tinto epilogue, the book presents little new information and few new concepts for managing retention.

Collectively the authors have explored a wide range of issues, which makes the book a worthwhile reference source and guide for practitioners and policy makers working in the student services and support field. Readers and users alike need to be cognisant of the social and cultural context in which the research was conducted and practices applied as application to other situations may not always be possible or successful.