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Book Review – Keeping Students in Higher Education: Successful Practices and Strategies for Retention

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Book Review - Keeping Students in Higher Education: Successful Practices and Strategies for Retention

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I agree entirely with the authors' notion of student retention that permeates this book, namely that: "Retention is not merely keeping students in higher education. It is also about helping each student develop as a successful student, navigating some of the most important years of adult life." However, this important idea is contained among a somewhat bewildering array of ideas on the complex topic of retention in the higher education sector.

The authors recognise, quite appropriately, that there is considerable variation in retention practices and strategies. Hence, they are not keen to be overly prescriptive in the perspectives they offer. To this end, a number of route maps are offered to assist readers in navigating their way through comprehensive and diverse content.

Five vignettes offer a "flavour of student situations" that encompass six specific aims ranging from an outline of a basic approach to keeping student in higher education, through expanding readers' understanding of specific aspects of student retention development programmes. In sum, these vignettes are designed to help readers implement their own institutional retention efforts.

Macro and micro considerations of student retention are covered in four major thematic sections and addressed in twelve chapters. The four major themes are: the challenge of retention, institutional issues, course-based issues, and finally individual student based issues. Each of the twelve chapters opens with a list of main points indexing what follows.

Various tools are offered that provide a useful structure to access and relate to the book's content. However, the plethora of organisational pathways made it difficult to map the content. In particular, the opening and lengthy vignette seemed inappropriate to what followed. I found it generally difficult to relate the main points of each chapter to its contents; it was not easy to see the connecting threads between the many ideas put forward. However, there are some good nuggets of practice and some innovative modelling. The "Pathway to Retention" section in Chapter 1, for example, helpfully encapsulates the

challenge of retention and provides readers with a useful model applicable to various types of higher education institutions.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 6 in Part Two are also useful and more accessible. Chapter 6 stresses the vital significance of proactive support in enhancing student retention and provides a powerful illustration of academic maturity and retention risk.

In contrast, the language and content of Chapter 4 that addresses the concepts of retention assets of higher education institutions and their communities, is more difficult to penetrate.

In Part Three, five dimensions of retention programmes were again difficult to navigate and rationalise in terms of the pattern of ideas and how they were related. By virtue if it being a composite of several programmes operating in the USA, the exemplar retention programme in Part Four was rather complicated.

Given my own grounding in retention gained in the UK over the last three years, I found myself asking repeatedly why the content, which was in places innovative and thought provoking, was so difficult to follow, integrate and synthesise. Yet, the story that these authors have written about is undoubtedly one of the most important aspects of higher education today, especially as we strive to achieve an agenda of wider student access and participation.

In conclusion, readers who dip into this volume will garner some important ideas and practices. But this is not a readily coordinated story. Put simply, an attempt to index the contents according to the range of route maps offered may well lead to readers being side-tracked from the key issues of locating strategies to enhance student retention, such as assisting students to becoming successful learners able meet their study aspirations.

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