“What Do You Do if There Is No Silver Bullet?”

Keynote Address: John N. Gardner

Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education

Higher Education Conference: Enrollment Management, February 2, 2006, Oklahoma City

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. This is a great day for me and I hope you—for me doubly because I have been honored by this invitation to address this conference and because it is another sort of minor milestone for me, my birthday! And as my accountant would say with respect to my annual tax liabilities, it is better than the alternative. And I can honestly, I mean really honestly say, there is nothing I would rather be doing on my birthday than fulfilling the potential of being able to influence an entire state’s higher education establishment on the subject of my favorite crusade, improving retention and graduation performance for our deserving students, particularly from the first to the second year! I know how important that is. I almost didn’t make it. The first grades ever sent home to my parents were three F’s, two D’s, and I A. And Debra Stuart invited this guy to address you?!

Let me extend my thanks to Dr. Stuart and the rest of the Chancellor Risser’s staff and any others who were involved in the decision to invite me. There is almost always a risk in recommending a major speaker. But there was no risk in inviting my esteemed colleague from Indiana University, Don Hossler, who will be your luncheon intellectual stimulation, who is truly the most thoughtful scholar of the enrollment management profession and whose high standards for intellectual substance I am sure will challenge us all. I want to thank the Regents staff for their hospitality to me and for their solicitation of my input into the planning of this conference. I wish us all well.

I am not exactly a stranger to Oklahoma higher education. I started my own career as a meeting planner with the hosting of the first “first-year experience” conference 25 years ago and in 1987 we, the original USC, brought the first what we called “regional” fye conference to, of all places, Tulsa. We did so because a Continuing Education officer there called and
threatened me that if we didn’t come and do it he would do it on his own! I liked that kind of initiative and thought we should reward it. This regionalization turned out to be very successful and since then we have had more than 100,000 higher educators attend these meetings. And large contingents of Oklahoma higher educators have been among them.

I have actually been on only three campuses in this state: the University of Tulsa, Rogers State University and Oklahoma State University at Stillwater. At the latter, I was inspired by the example of the College of Human Environmental Science which has been able to secure the generosity of a successful couple to build, literally, a Student Success Center decentralized in that very College’s main building. And it is a marvelous facility and just shows me what a college in a research university can do when it says that the success of new students is so important that it will make it a top priority for fund raising. I urge you all to go take a look at what they have done. What a partnership: the first-year experience, academic colleges in research universities, university advancement and philanthropy.

And most recently, I had the opportunity to participate in an outstanding national convening organized by the University of Oklahoma, one I urge you to attend next year, the National Symposium on Student Retention, organized by none other than Oklahoma’s very own Dr. Rosemary Hayes and her Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange. I know well how difficult it is to be a prophet in one’s own land, but take it from me, her work is really making a difference in the analytical, data based examination that campuses are undertaking of their own unique retention dynamics. There is perhaps no greater external lever for change than comparative institutional data.

Now none of this makes me an expert on Oklahoma higher education, but I am certainly not a novice either.

I suggested to the conference planners that I could, would like to talk about “what do you do if there is no silver bullet”. And, ladies and gentleman, there is no silver bullet, even though legions of educators have been coming to retention convenings for 25 years looking for such a holy grail. Well, maybe there is a silver bullet. Just one problem. It won’t work for you folks. And that silver bullet evokes a theme that the unenlightened former governor of Georgia, Lester Maddox, once proclaimed in the 1960’s in reference to another commendable public policy goal, prison reform. His solution to that
challenge was simply to recruit what he called “a better class of prisoner”. The silver bullet that won’t work is simply to go out and recruit more, or even fill your class, with upper income socio-economic status, high-achieving high school students. And if you can do that, I guarantee your retention will skyrocket. Just one problem: your demographics don’t suggest that is a realistic solution. So you’re stuck. You have to consider some other strategies. I would like to talk with you about some of those “other strategies”.

This talk gives me the occasion to rethink what I know and believe about the challenges we face in trying to improve student retention. One of the problems when you get to be a perceived “expert” on or spokesperson on any theme, is that you have frequent opportunities to talk about whatever and therefore to keep saying what you have said very, very recently. While I cannot change my basic beliefs and knowledge, even on my birthday, I developed as part of my own code of professional conduct, years ago as a young professor, that I would never give the same lecture twice. And so, Rosemary, you are not going to here remotely the same talk you heard me give at your national conference in early October. So today’s message reflects what I believe and know today. And no matter when I get the occasion to talk about this topic it is always a challenge and critical test of my liberal arts training to reduce this enormously complex subject, of why some students persist and complete, and others do not, to some take away, practical, and hopefully inspiring ideas that you could actually go home and implement, and really want to do so.

Let me start then today with the “first-year experience”. Researchers debate some aspects of the retention challenge but they/we are in agreement that almost always we experience our greatest losses, at the institutional level, during or at the conclusion of the first-year of undergraduate study. This idea of “the first-year experience” is an example of what some have pursued as a “silver bullet”. I think you can safely conclude that an appropriate focus—but not an exclusive one—for your campus could be on “the first-year experience”. But what do I mean by that? Well I can tell you what I think I have always meant by that and also what I think most people thought I really meant. I started using the term “freshman year experience” back in 1982 to mean the complex whole of everything we do intentionally and unintentionally for our new college students. I also meant by this a complex set of values and beliefs that institutions and their members hold about the
importance and value of the beginning college experience and what they provide in that experience as a result of these values and beliefs.

But at the same time as I was espousing the argument that more campuses ought to be spending more time, energy, resources, on improving the “first-year experience”, I was also personally directing a “program” for first-year students, University 101, a first-year seminar; and I was offering conferences where a lot of time was spent disseminating aspects of the first-year seminar. So what I thought and said, was not what people heard. What people heard and acted upon was that “the first-year experience” = a “program” and in particular, a credit bearing course to teach students how to make the transition to college. And low and behold, what were the results?

In brief, hundreds and hundreds of colleges—now up to 94%, developed a first-year seminar. And eventually a research literature developed around an investigation of the outcomes of such courses. I even founded at USC a blind, refereed journal whose initial primary purpose was to encourage, collect, disseminate such research findings. And the results were so encouraging that more and more campuses decided to adopt or expand such courses, or to move them from elective to required status. Why? Because it was almost always reported that student participation in such courses was associated with improved first-to-second year retention rates, increased knowledge and utilization of student support services/resources, higher levels of out-of-class interaction with faculty; greater probability of joining and participating in co-curricular activities and groups; and overall higher levels of satisfaction both with orientation and with the institution. Studies also eventually found that there were higher graduation rates, that the retention rates held up over time. Of perhaps greatest interest was the fact that these outcomes were often achieved in elective populations that had lower predicted potential for survival than the more qualified students who did not participate in such courses. Now I tell you this because while retention may have increased, that was necessary, but not sufficient. And hence no silver bullet.

I would like to make a historical note here that when we (USC) started offering the first-year seminar in the early 1970’s, we did so not out of any desire for enhanced retention, but to, believe it or not, teach students to love the University. We wanted to introduce them to the excitement of a great university and especially to all the ways that post secondary education could positively impact them if only they understood the roles and purposes of
higher education. Well, we don’t start or sustain such courses today with these goals paramount and I note this wistfully for a time that was more hopeful, idealistic, and aspirational. In fact, it could be argued by me as a recovering former historian, that it would be impossible to launch many of the later twentieth century social justice oriented higher education reforms today in an era where we seemingly are more interested in tax cutting and reducing our commitments to those who are less fortunate than we. Just look at the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina if you need recent evidence. Well, I better not go further down this road.

Back to the first-year seminar for a moment: do you, should you, have as part of your institutional retention strategy, a comprehensive first-year seminar? Yes, I would strongly advocate that. But I would not argue for it as any silver bullet and I want to address what else I think we need to be doing.

First of all, I think we need to rethink the merits of student “retention” itself, and how we talk about it. Personally, I have retention fatigue. We have been doing an incredible number of things over nearly 3 decades to improve student retention. And still, nationally speaking, our rates for institutional retention are essentially flat. Now if we focus on the student, their mobility patterns, they appear to be doing considerably better than we are, in ranges, my reading of the research would tell me, from a low of 7 to a high of 20%. The main point is that institutional rates understate individual patterns. But this is very hard to trace and document to the satisfaction of serious researchers like Don Hossler. And I could argue that if we hadn’t been doing what we have been doing, given who’s been coming to college, that our retention rates would be even worse. But let’s not get overly self-congratulatory. The job is not yet done.

I have been inspired by the efforts of colleagues working not only in first-year seminars, but also in two other interventions I believe to be particularly effective, and which should be in your arsenal: learning communities, and Supplemental Instruction. But given the fact that we have not reached a critical mass of student participation in those two interventions, they too are necessary but not sufficient.

Personally, I believe, that the way “retention” has been pursued (i.e. as a “program” and not by focusing on what faculty do), that we have come about as far as we are going to be able to go. I think it is time for a new frontier.
For me, and I believe many other academics whose behaviors and support have an enormous impact on what happens to first-year students especially (the faculty primarily), this whole push for retention amounts to a pursuit of a minimum standard. Retention means maintaining a pulse, the ability to fog a mirror. It says nothing about what students learn or should be experiencing in college or what should be the larger societal benefits of successful participation in higher education. As a result, the mantra of a call to arms for retention, is not sufficiently motivational. And this is why in my own current work I am trying to redefine the purposes for focus on the first year, to a set of aspirational standards and principles, which could be used to examine and redesign the beginning college experience. You have a copy of those principles before you.

Well, if I were you, working in Oklahoma, and charged with the responsibility of trying to improve time-to-degree completion rates and overall degree attainment, what would I be thinking about and trying to do? I would be considering these two dozen possibilities (hang on, this is going to be a wild ride, a rapid tour de force):

1. For starters, as a basic premise, I would be using as an intellectual road map the IEO model articulated by Alexander Astin. I would be trying to improve first-year retention primarily by focusing on the environment into which you put your students, and not primarily on changing student input characteristics (e.g. standardized aptitude scores, SES, etc)
2. I would be working on the whole concept of responsibility for student learning. Whose is it? I would be trying to increase the willingness of higher educators to accept more responsibility, as our colleagues in K-12 do. This means we would have to rethink and abandon some of our social Darwinian notions about the inevitability of failure and our resulting high tolerance for failure. I cannot think of any other sector of society where tolerance for failure is so high. Certainly not in our lives as consumers.
3. I would attempt to reframe the conversation, as Don Hossler’s colleague, George Kuh, has lead us to do, from “retention” to engagement. I would be trying to measure how engaged our students are and what are the successful practices and behaviors of institutions that engage behaviors. Here again the focus is as much, if not more, on institutional behaviors rather than student behaviors.
4. I would be focusing on high risk courses, the high DWFI courses. This may be one of the most important outcomes of our current national work with “Foundations of Excellence” campuses whereby they are invited to identify the patterns of high risk course taking, and then discuss and decide what action if any needs to be taken. What we are offering students, it is very apparent, is truly a crap shoot, the opportunity to fail. Holding constant the characteristics of students, there is enormous variability in potential for students to pass or fail a common course experience, taught across multiple sections, with different instructors, where the key variable is the professor, not the students.

What I am saying here is that a “new frontier” is the examination of the introductory college course. This is where the rubber meets the road. This is where most retention programs don’t go. Because this is historically what my wife, Betsy Barefoot, calls an “assessment free zone”. This is the realm of academic freedom for faculty, and freedom to fail for students. Go here at your own peril. It is one of the last retention frontiers. I know of a few institutions that are attempting to pursue this by, in effect, creating separate faculties, separate teaching units for new students.

5. Now here is another sacred cow that will probably fall on deaf ears. It seems to me to be patently clear, that given the unacceptable retention and transfer rates in and from two-year colleges to the baccalaureate tier, that one of the biggest obstacles to baccalaureate degree completion, is the Maginot Line between the two sectors. If we truly wanted to improve BA degree attainment isn’t a strategy to increase the number of students, who, as a function of state policy, start in the four-year sector? Ah, John, not very realistic. Not going to happen. So, the alternative has to be much more integration between the two and the four-year sectors. Much more attention to student success in the two-year sector. And more four-year institutional behavior that acts as if it understands that they have, in effect, outsourced their beginning college experience to the two-year sector. The implications of this are profound and call for both changes at the two-year and four-year receiving levels.

6. I would more opportunities for NEED based aid vs Merit based aid—and, parenthetically, this would represent a significant shift in the aid awarding policy for many institutions, particularly those with elite aspirations.
7. Now here’s a heresy: should we be revisiting the old idea of the “work college”, i.e. where students essentially perform a significant amount of the “labor” necessary to run the place? There are only seven left. My point here is to increase on-campus employment, a significant retention agent and an excellent investment of institutional funds.

8. Looking at student course taking patterns, and course outcomes, I believe that students are telling us what works and we just need to know and act on what we must be able to see, namely, that many beginning students would in all probability perform better if they took by policy and design, a four course and not a five course load.

9. I would precede and complement that with providing more opportunities for summer bridge programs on both optional and required bases, depending on student needs and qualifications.

10. And if I could be CAO on any one of your campuses and have only one action priority for next year’s retention focus, I would declare war on math failure!

11. And here’s a recommendation that can only work for some types of institutions, almost always at the four-year level: provide more opportunities for a residential college experience.

12. And, given what we know about the enormous influence peers have on peers, we need more intentional use of peer leadership particularly in the classroom setting (e.g. beyond the first-year seminar setting where they are being increasingly used. The point is that we need to take more control over which peers influence newly arriving peers and to raise the standards for the selection and training processes so that students are influencing other students in the ways we would ideally like them to be influencing each other.

13. We need to restructure the stock and trade of the retention process and reconstitute the “Retention Committee” into one that is less administratively driven and more inclusive of faculty participation. I would recommend that every campus have a standing committee on the first year—a group of advocates, stakeholders, on the order of IU’s “Frosh UP” Committee which so impressed Time Magazine in 2001.

14. Based on my current work with the Foundations of Excellence process, (an intensive, guided, year-long self study of the entirety of the first college year which leads to an action/improvement plan), I would recommend that a campus seriously consider the merits of undertaking a comprehensive self study of the first year as a unit of analysis per se. It is hard for me to fathom why so many colleges that
have such a hemorrhage in the first year have never studied this component seriously. More about that in my conversation sessions to follow if you are interested.

15. And one of most difficult things to do of all, we must pay more attention to the faculty rewards culture. See especially the work of Gene Rice, formerly of AAHE and now with AAC and U.

16. And we need to pay more attention to the real gatekeepers of the academic culture: academic deans and department chairs. These are the men and women who have enormous impact on unit level decisions that impact whether or not first-year student succeed or fail. They determine, for example, who teaches these students, who advises them, the rewards structure, departmental meeting agendas where student retention issues may or may not ever be discussed.

17. And this recommendation will get me few invitations to student affairs meetings: at the risk of making a generalization for which I believe there must be ad hominem exceptions, I believe that the student affairs functions must be integrated increasingly into the academic channels. And I think this is a natural evolution of the directions within the professional student affairs culture, particularly NASPA, to stress student learning as the ultimate goal of student affairs’ work. This is a very complicated subject to even begin to do justice to in a talk of this breadth but, in short, this still relatively young profession, as long as it and the academy were expanding (until 1990) was allowed to grow, ever and ever more distinct from the academic community and that worked well as long as there were the resources to permit it. Those days are gone. I believe this critical subset has far more to contribute to the retention conversation and would be better able to do so were it more cohesively integrated within academic channels. There are multiple models for doing so; again, this is a topic best left perhaps to the conversation session.

18. I believe the basic paradigm for traditional aged students (as opposed to more adult learners, distance learning students) with fixed completion dates for courses being the overwhelmingly dominant model, must be reexamined and modified. Looking at their behaviors and outcomes, they are telling us that they certainly do not all learn at the same rates, let alone in the same manner. And it is apparent that in spite of their best efforts many lead lives that constantly interfere with their aspirations to finish “on schedule”. I believe that we cannot increase retention without more opportunities for self-paced
instruction. This is, admittedly, an assertion that is untested empirically. Perhaps you could do so—it would be a service.

19. The focus on retention, overwhelmingly, has been disproportionately based for very good reasons on the first college year. But, as numerous studies have shown, we by no means have the retention problem addressed once we have students over that hump. More attention is needed to the sophomore year experience—a critical developmental period when the intensive first-year support has all but disappeared; and meanwhile students are making those critical decisions of “just what is my purpose and can this place help me achieve it? A number of schools are beginning to pay more serious attention to this period; a few are appointing individuals to direct such attention; and a literature base is in development (see the USCNRC monograph #31 Visible Solutions for Invisible Students and at least three more are in various stages of development.

20. In my own work, one of the biggest bets of my career is to link my work on the first year to the larger efforts of regional accreditors. That is to say that I am encouraging campuses to combine/integrate something they don’t have to do with something they do have to do, namely: use as a basis for reaccreditation a self study on the first-year as a unit of analysis per se, which produces an improvement plan which then is evaluated/monitored by the accreditor. Such an arrangement is now formally encouraged and provided by the nation’s largest regional accreditor, YOUR accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission; and this opportunity is open to both two-year and four-year campuses, both through the PEAQ special emphasis self-study and the AQIP focus on a selected improvement project.

21. In general, we need to raise expectations for the college experience. No one ever got more out of people by asking less of them. And there is a mounting body of evidence that we are asking less of students than they expect of us when they matriculate—a sort of revolution of lowering expectations. In part this is a kind of implicit contract: I’m a busy prof doing my research and consulting; I don’t really have time for you because of all the other demands on my time; so if you don’t demand too much of me, I won’t demand too much of you. And that’s how it works, I promise you.

22. I believe we have to redefine the purpose of the beginning, the first year, the foundation—or even have a defined purpose at all, other than the historic purposes of: making money, weeding out, and allowing senior faculty to ignore the beginning students if they so choose.
23. And, while we were well intentioned to attack retention through “programs”, I think it is time now for a more coordinated approach at the institutional level. Thus, we need a plan, a grand design for especially the beginning experience, which most of us don’t have. So, the programs are not coordinated, integrated, connected. The result is competition and lack of synergy. For example, this means connecting the reform efforts as in first-year seminars and learning communities to a larger push to rethink the whole first year.

24. And if we are going to move beyond a primary emphasis on “programs” which inevitably are for some students and not all students, I would argue we have to look more at what is needed by ALL students. And that is the only way you build political support in America—not for the underclasses, but for the great majority, whatever that is.

You must be thinking by now, “this could go on forever”. No it couldn’t. It’s time for you to decide what, if anything, you are going to take away from this talk to reflect and then act on—please feel free to let me know sometime.

And now I invite you to join me for one of my two conversation sessions, and to look forward to how Don Hossler and I, do or do not reinforce each other (we did not collaborate on the creation of our remarks)

Thank you ladies and gentlemen and again I thank the staff of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education.