

RETENTION REVIEW NEWSLETTER



University College
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point

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Did You Know?



The month of January was named for Janus, the Roman god of beginnings and endings, gateways, and other circumstances involving a transition. Artistic depictions emphasize Janus' connection with transitions, portraying him as a two-headed man looking both backwards and forwards.

It may seem odd to headline the **December** issue of the *Retention Review* with this interesting tidbit of information about the month of January. Yet the choice seems logical to me because December is often a time of Janus-like reflection for faculty and staff whose work follows the rhythm of the academic year.

Every year of my teaching career, I took time in December to look back on the setting semester, reflecting on what had gone well (or not so well) and to look ahead to the rising semester, reflecting on the curricular or instructional changes I would like to make. I suspect that many readers engage in a similar Janus-like reflection during or near this point in the Fall semester.

As part of this “Janus” reflection, it’s natural to focus on the things our students didn’t know or didn’t do well. After all, our students’ struggles generally represent those aspects of our courses or interactions with student employees that might require revision. But what about the things that went well? Do we take time to reflect on successes, using our insights to ensure continued excellence in the classroom and in student interactions? I’ll be the first to admit that this type of reflection is not my strong suit.

And what about the knowledge and skills that students bring with them to the classroom or workplace? Do our backwards-and-forwards reflections help us determine how we can discover and capitalize on students’ prior knowledge and experiences? Again, I will admit that I find this kind of reflection to be challenging.

As much as I struggle to develop meaningful ways of discovering and leveraging students' prior knowledge and life experiences, I nevertheless recognize the importance of tapping into students' personal experiences, knowledge, and passions.

Students' hobbies, paid work, and household experiences may have laid the groundwork in surprising ways for the study of content in your course or the completion of tasks in your office. Students' level of comfort with and motivation to engage with concepts in fields such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, soils, aquaculture, and wildlife management may be enhanced by knowledge of and experience with music, video gaming, electronics, athletics, childcare, cosmetology, needlework, cooking and baking, gardening, farming, fishing, auto repair, construction work, landscaping, pet care, or household maintenance. Meanwhile, students' level of comfort with and motivation to engage with concepts in fields such as sociology, education, psychology, linguistics, literature, history, business, political science, philosophy, and cultural studies may be enhanced by experiences of multilingualism, multiculturalism, community activism, involvement in religious traditions, responsibilities in a multi-generational household or care-giving setting, and work in a family business. (For the record, my own understanding of arithmetic, algebra, physics, and geometry has been greatly enhanced by my hobbies: music, amateur radio, bicycling, and embroidery.)

The idea that students' home experiences and knowledge serve as a springboard for their school-based learning was articulated by González, Moll, and Amanti in *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms* (2005). In this work, the authors encourage educators to shift their perspective of students' abilities from one of deficit to one of asset. While a deficit perspective emphasizes what students *cannot* do, an asset perspective emphasizes what students *can* do. An asset perspective supports student success in many ways, most notably as follows: (1) educators and supervisors who approach classes and employee interactions from an asset perspective may find it easier to offer support, encouragement, and motivation in ways that ring true with students, and (2) educators and supervisors who adopt an asset perspective may find it easier to facilitate learning because they look proactively for links between students' experiences and the skills or knowledge they must learn .

For an overview of research on asset-based approaches to pedagogy and student interactions, see [this article from *Studies in Engineering Education*](#). For pointers on nurturing an asset perspective, see [this tip sheet from the Association of College and University Educators \(ACUE\)](#). For personalized tips, [consider booking a course-design consultation with UWSP's CITL staff!](#)

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