STUDENT SUCCESS *in* COLLEGE

Promoting Student Success

Small Steps Campuses Can Take

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Occasional Paper #9

Six Conditions that Matter to Student Success

I.   "Living" Mission and "Lived" Educational Philosophy
II.   Unshakeable Focus on Student Learning
III.   Environments Adapted for Educational Enrichment
IV.   Clear Pathways to Student Success
V.   Improvement-Oriented Ethos
VI.   Shared Responsibility for Educational Quality and Student Success

Colleges and universities can increase the number of students who graduate by making a number of small, strategic changes in institutional policies and practices. Some schools have done this by focusing on effective educational practices and empowering faculty, staff and students to work together in new, productive ways. Others have improved the campus climate for learning by carefully assessing what students are experiencing or by realigning resources to induce students to participate in activities associated with persistence and other desired outcomes of college. Senior administrators play a key role in such efforts when they speak plainly and consistently about the importance of student success and make decisions congruent with this priority.

The suggestions offered here are drawn from a study of 20 diverse four-year colleges and universities that have higher-than-predicted graduation rates and, through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), demonstrated that they have effective practices for fostering success among students of differing abilities and aspirations. These institutions – called DEEP schools here because they were studied for the project on Documenting Effective Educational Practices -- clearly communicate that they value high quality undergraduate teaching and learning, and provide effective, well-linked academic and support services. Despite constraints, they have found ways to create supportive learning environments, ensuring that students engage with course content, faculty and peers, inside and outside the classroom.

National Survey of Student Engagement

1. *Develop a compelling message, share it with everyone*

The various public presentations that presidents, provosts, deans and other senior administrators make are opportunities to underscore the importance of promoting student success and its value to both students and the institution. In annual state-of-the-campus reports, convocations, board meetings and other occasions, leaders can signal that student success is an objective for all groups on campus, not just for certain groups or offices.

At DEEP schools, presidents and provosts systematically encouraged a broad institutional commitment to student success by conveying a clear message repeated by other senior campus leaders. Sustained energy, consistent signals, and purposefulness are needed to surmount institutional inertia and organizational complexity in support of student success. Leaders honed their message, found the most compelling words for their setting, and then used it again and again. They reinforced it with examples, special commissions, and systematic studies focused on the quality of the undergraduate experience.

For example, the dean of arts and sciences at the University of Michigan championed new learning initiatives with help from a special commission and several reports over a four-year period. The University of Kansas provost made the case for why good teaching matters at his research intensive university. Over time, his message became a widely recognized mantra cited by campus officials, students and faculty alike and reinforced by multiple awards made annually to recognize outstanding teaching. At California State University, Monterey Bay a faculty group prepared a "reflective essay" about the role and nature of academic rigor in their context to underscore the importance of challenging and supporting their students, many of whom because of their backgrounds are not expected to attend—let alone graduate—from college.

> **"Students benefit from knowing that the institution wants them and others to succeed. Senior administrators send strong messages that students matter when their voices are heard and respected on important policy decisions...."**

2. *Focus on making small changes that can have big impact*

For students, college often resembles a confusing maze of seemingly unconnected offices, programs, and people. Small adjustments can increase their accessibility and create a more coherent experience. Karl Weick (1984) observed that a series of "small wins" is more likely to have desired effects than a single, complex initiative. A small win is "…a concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance. By itself, one small win may seem unimportant. A series of wins at small but significant tasks, however, reveals a pattern that may attract allies, deter opponents, and lower resistance to subsequent proposals" (Weick, 1984, p. 43). Ursinus College clusters all first-year students in one area of campus housing in order to make it easier for them to talk with one another about idea and topics introduced in the Common Intellectual Experience – interdisciplinary coursework required of all students that features common readings and specially designed out-of-class activities. At Longwood University, the vice president for student affairs serves on a number of academic committees to ensure that out-of-class experiences of students are taken into account when making policy and resource allocation decisions. The University of the South, during its revision of the core curriculum, reduced the teaching load to allow faculty to develop new teaching materials. At Wabash College, managing logistical details for field trips, helping format presentations for classroom use, and other administrative support are handled by a center that frees up faculty to concentrate on content and pedagogy.

Even routine decisions about scheduling can enhance student experiences and reinforce the institution's commitment to student learning and success. Wabash's annual celebration of student research and creative work is scheduled to coincide with dates when the governing board meets. With little added effort, it allows board members to interact with students on matters directly related to the College's educational program.

3. *Build cross-functional support structures.*

 Many DEEP schools use a "tag team" approach to challenge and support students, offering academic and other services in an integrated package to reduce the possibility that a student will fall through the cracks. Combined, cross-unit approaches are more convenient for students, and studies have shown that such approaches greatly reinforce each other, with encouraging results. Fayetteville State University combined advising and several learning assistance programs together, resulting in increased student retention. At Gonzaga University, one center organizes both academic and student-affairs activities that provide opportunities for community service. At Alverno College, student affairs staff identified co-curricular outcomes explicitly tied to the college's academic outcomes. The University of Michigan expanded the number of living-learning programs to touch more students in meaningful ways with integrated student

support and academic initiatives, such as with the Community Scholars program and its WISE (Women in Science and Engineering) residential program.

First-year programs or seminars typically draw on the combined expertise of academic and student affairs staff members. The first-year seminar at the University of Texas at El Paso features discipline-based topics that are popular among entering students and leadership development opportunities. At Winston-Salem State University, faculty members who teach in the first-year seminar also serve as advisors and mentors to the students they teach.

Miami University successfully developed cross-disciplinary faculty learning communities that are organized around themes, such as approaches to team teaching and incorporating ethics across the curriculum. These communities bring faculty together from diverse disciplines for a year-long exploration of ways to improve teaching.

4. Create additional ways to involve students

Students benefit from knowing that the institution wants them and others to succeed. Senior administrators send strong messages that students matter when their voices are heard and respected on important policy decisions, whether college-wide or at the individual department level. At Sweet Briar College, students can call for an all-campus discussion about issues of concern. The University of the South fosters a sense of collective student responsibility by having students coordinate services, plan major events and serve on important committees.

When Wheaton College planned a major curriculum revision, student members of the Educational Policy Committee actively participated in the planning process. At the University of Kansas, students make up 20% of the membership of most governance committees; in fact, a student is always the vice president of the 50-member University Council, leading the meeting if the Council president cannot attend.

Students at Macalester College, The Evergreen State College, and Winston-Salem State University are extensively involved in peer teaching and tutoring roles, which are often powerful experiences for both students and the tutors as they become more fully conversant with course content in deeper ways. Wofford College's student preceptors work alongside faculty members in designing course materials for learning communities. Sweet Briar College pairs a first-year student with a junior or senior on a research project supervised by a faculty member.

5. Recognize the often forgotten sources of student support

In addition to faculty and student affairs staff, many other offices and campus employees—librarians, chaplains, and athletic coaches, for example—are important resources, providing helpful perspectives and assistance as they interact with students in a variety of settings outside the classroom. As part of its successful effort to increase persistence rates by expanding on-campus employment, the University of Maine, Farmington links students to campus employees who serve as role models for students. Wofford College's "Ms. Rita," the manager of the coffee shop, is known by all on campus because of the sincere, uplifting interest she takes in students' personal and academic lives.

Teaching and learning centers at strong performing colleges offer rich and varied resources to help faculty and staff at different stages of their careers to create more engaging conditions for learning inside and outside the classroom. At the University of Texas at El Paso, Center on Teaching staff helped solve a specific concern by working with faculty to create more effective team teaching in large classes. At California State University, Monterey Bay the teaching center director works closely with faculty on ways to implement active and collaborative learning strategies, a priority for the university.

6. Create off-campus partnerships to enhance student experiences

DEEP schools have found that students gain immeasurably through internships and employment on as well as off the campus. Community service projects help students develop personal skills and gain exposure to new ideas. Campuses also benefit from recognizing the wealth of expertise and assistance that members of the community can offer.

Fayetteville State University art majors work in local galleries; science majors host an event that brings middle school students to campus. At the University of Texas at El Paso the bi-national Leadership Development program takes advantage of its border setting by bringing students from Mexico and the U.S. together in common cause. Winston-Salem State University integrates community service into required courses and works with members of the community to plan for the workforce skills needed for the region's evolving economy. Alverno College uses members of the community such as accountants and small business owners to help assess whether students have achieved important learning requirements. Longwood University links funding of student organizations to a requirement that, for every $1,000 of funding, the organization's members must contribute 10

hours of community service, thereby reinforcing the University's goals for student engagement in the community.

Questions to Ponder:

Although there is no blueprint for creating an institution oriented to student success, thinking about how these principles can be adapted to your context could make a positive difference.

1. What messages about student success are conveyed by public presentations of campus leaders? Are there ways to link themes across various settings for greater impact?

2. How well are campus offices linked together to support students? What organizational or physical arrangements stand in the way? What ways can be found to remove barriers?

3. Where cross-unit programs exist, are there small changes that could enhance their effectiveness?

4. How can student participation in campus governance be used to enhance their learning and that of other students?

5. How can the institution better recognize the many people and units that have regular contact with students?

6. What opportunities exist in the local community to enhance student learning and how can they be optimized?

Answers to these questions from different types of strong performing institutions around the country are offered in *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*. The book features what twenty diverse, educationally effective colleges and universities do to promote student success. The Documenting Effective Educational Practices (DEEP) Project was supported with generous grants from the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. Altogether, the 24-member research team talked with more than 2,700 people during its 40 multiple-day site visits to the DEEP schools.

Six properties and conditions shared by the DEEP colleges and universities are discussed in *Student Success in College* along with an array of effective educational policies and practices that, adapted appropriately, can help a campus create and sustain a culture that supports student success. The book can be used in faculty and staff development, strategic planning, institutional mission clarification, leadership development, and collaborative efforts between academic and student affairs. A companion volume, *Assessing Conditions to Enhance Educational Effectiveness: The Inventory for Student Engagement and Success,* will be available in September 2005 and provides a template for institutions to use to identify areas of institutional functioning that can be improved to promote student success.

Sources:

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Project DEEP Colleges and Universities

Alverno College (WI)	Sweet Briar College (VA)
California State University at Monterey Bay (CA)	University of Kansas (KS)
The Evergreen State College (WA)	University of Maine at Farmington (ME)
Fayetteville State University (NC)	University of Michigan (MI)
George Mason University (VA)	University of Texas at El Paso (TX)
Gonzaga University (WA)	Ursinus College (PA)
Longwood University (VA)	Wabash College (IN)
Macalester College (MN)	Wheaton College (MA)
Miami University (OH)	Winston-Salem State University (NC)
Sewanee: University of the South (TN)	Wofford College (SC)