STUDENT SUCCESS *in* COLLEGE

Promoting Student Success

What Department Chairs Can Do

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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

Department chairs are in a position to help shape a culture where student learning is the central focus of faculty, staff, and students (Gmelch & Schuh, 2004). They hire, socialize, and evaluate faculty members' performance, guide curriculum development, and maintain the quality of academic programs. At the same time, department chairs typically assume the role without any specific preparation for the position; many have little or no experience as academic administrators. Yet, they are expected to lead their peers in establishing and implementing departmental goals and objectives. If improving educational effectiveness and enhancing student learning are priorities, what should the department chair emphasize?

The suggestions offered here are based on an in-depth examination of 20 diverse four-year colleges and universities that have higher-than-predicted graduation rates and higher-than-predicted scores on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Taken together, these measures suggest that their policies, programs, practices, and campus climates challenge and support students of differing abilities and aspirations. How might these ideas be applied to your department?

National Survey of Student Engagement

1. Adopt a talent development philosophy to guide department activities

Although their educational missions and academic programs may differ, most faculty members at strong performing colleges and universities subscribe to the proposition that every student can learn under the right conditions. The department chair's task is to remind colleagues that it is pedagogically sound to "meet students where they are." For example, a key premise of the "assets" philosophy in place at California State University at Monterey Bay is that students' prior knowledge and experiences are a relevant foundation on which to build subsequent learning activities. Faculty members fashion assignments that require students to incorporate their work and life experiences, such as the communications course where students conduct life history interviews about the experiences of students who are first in their families to go to college. George Mason University sponsors workshops for faculty that present ways for assessing the diverse learning needs of students along with creating alternative assignments to meet course learning goals, such as substituting oral presentations or short papers for examinations. At the University of Texas at El Paso, faculty members in the UNIV 1301 introduction to college learning course teach students how to gain the most from participating in active and collaborative learning activities. Department chairs can encourage their faculty colleagues to set high expectations consistent with students' abilities and design assignments appropriate to students' abilities and the course learning goals.

2. Support faculty in creating the conditions that foster learning

Strong performing institutions committed to undergraduate education keep their eye on the prize: students and their success. At George Mason University, where many students live off-campus, faculty feedback to students often is on line so that it is readily accessible. Harnessing the power of collaboration to explore "what works" in promoting student learning has worked well at Miami University which sponsors Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs), cross-disciplinary faculty groups of 5 or more faculty members (8 to 12 is the recommended size) who over the course of the academic year examine issues such as cooperative learning, ethics across the curriculum, team teaching, problem-based learning, and so forth. In the past two decades, more than one-third of the current faculty has participated in FLCs, giving broad-based legitimacy to efforts to enhance student learning. Department chairs do their faculty and students a great service by promoting the widespread use

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of what research studies show to be effective educational practices, such as frequent and timely feedback.

3. Emphasize advising as a valued form of teaching

Somewhere along the line at too many colleges and universities student advising was reclassified from a teaching responsibility to a service activity. Not so at institutions with strong graduation and engagement rates. At Ursinus College, advisors of first-year students are encouraged to contact their advisees on a weekly basis throughout the first semester, consistent with its philosophy of helping students make the transition from being dependent to independent learners. Advisor-advisee contact is ensured because students must see their advisor to obtain the personal identification number needed to register for classes. Wheaton College faculty members teaching the required First Year Seminar are the primary academic advisor for the students in their class. A similar approach is taken at Fayetteville State, where the Freshman Seminar course instructors serve as mentors for all students enrolled in their respective sections; faculty members also advise student organizations, with some groups having as many as three faculty advisors. Many Longwood University faculty members serve as a student's advisor for all four years, adopting a developmental approach to holistic advising that often evolves into mentoring; this institutional priority is emphasized in annual review and promotion and tenure processes. Department chairs can reinforce the importance of advising by, for example, featuring it in the annual reviews and rotating advising responsibilities for departmental clubs and organizations among the faculty.

4. Recruit and socialize new faculty so that their values and expectations are consistent with those of the institution

Faculty thrive in environments where their skills and interests are consistent with what their institutions expect of them. Strong performing institutions carefully recruit faculty members who have the skills and interests that align well with institutional priorities and needs. Early on, beginning with the campus interview, new faculty members are introduced to institutional expectations. The University of Maine at Farmington has an extended campus visit for campus faculty, typically three days so that applicants get a good feel for who their colleagues will be and what living in a small town is like. The University of Kansas and Longwood University involve students extensively in faculty recruitment; students also play key roles on university committees, side by side with faculty members. In recent years, Ursinus College

replaced about two fifths of its faculty with new hires. To insure a smooth, productive transition, the senior academic officer hosts weekly seminars to discuss institutional issues, curricular matters, and pedagogical approaches with selected senior faculty. The role of the department chair is central to the faculty recruitment and socialization process—working with search committees, advising on recruitment plans, providing a framework for a campus visit, working with faculty in identifying candidates who will receive offers of employment, ensuring that new faculty members each have a mentor, clarifying position expectations, and making resources available so that they can be productive teachers, scholars, and university citizens.

5. Encourage faculty and staff to make time for students

Maintaining an unwavering focus on student learning is labor-intensive. There are no short cuts, especially when it comes to student-faculty interaction. To create the conditions under which most students learn best, faculty, staff members, and others must "make time for students," whether face-to-face or electronically. Creating opportunities for students to work with faculty members on research are potentially life-changing experiences for students, which is why strong performing schools such as Miami University and the University of Michigan fund their University Research Opportunity Program and related initiatives. Another approach is to alter the physical environment to encourage student-faculty interaction, such as putting chairs at the ends of classroom building hallways so that faculty and students can continue discussions started in class or rearranging departmental furniture to create nooks and crannies where students can study and visit with peers and faculty, such as what Macalester College has done. Department chairs can signal the importance of spending time with students by emphasizing it in annual reviews and creating opportunities for informal interaction, such as inexpensive monthly socials and lobbying for discretionary dollars from institutional space allocation committees to create spaces that allow students and faculty members to come together. Judicious investments of resources in technology that enhance instruction and facilitate on line student-faculty contact are other ways the department chair can help colleagues "make time for students."

6. Create opportunities for students to teach students

When students teach or tutor their peers, or when they assist faculty members in planning, teaching, or co-facilitating a course, both teachers and students benefit. Upper-division Wofford College students work as peer tutors in its campus writing laboratory, as well as collaborate with faculty as preceptors in the humanities-

science learning communities. Some of the natural sciences units at Sweet Briar College feature student-student mentorship in research, where a first-year student works with an advanced student (typically a junior or senior) who is the primary investigator for the research project; the advanced student is supervised by the faculty member overseeing the research project. At the Winston-Salem State University Center for Student Success, carefully selected Campus PALs (Peer Advisor Leaders) help mentor their peers. Department chairs can set aside some of their modest discretionary resources to appoint students on a part-time hourly basis to work as tutors or peer instructors.

7. Encourage the development of learning communities

Just as faculty members benefit from being a member of the community of scholars, numerous studies show that students who participate in a learning community are more likely to persist (Laufgraben, 2005). The University of Michigan developed a variety of learning communities to help students transition more easily from high school to university life, such as the Michigan Community Scholars Program (MCSP) where students live together and each semester take at least one MCSP course together typically focused on some aspect of civic engagement. UTEP offers more than 70 learning communities, including a first-year seminar linked with English or math, or a cluster for provisionally admitted students, and interest-specific clusters in law and education. Wofford's learning communities are such powerful vehicles of socialization that students are as likely to identify themselves by the name of their learning community as their Greek-letter organization. Department chairs can champion the development of learning communities by providing modest financial support to underwrite some of their expenses.

8. Cultivate an improvement-oriented climate

High performing colleges and universities are never quite satisfied. They are imbued with a positive restlessness. They want to get better. For example, team teaching faculty members at The Evergreen State College (TESC) reinvent their courses annually based on data from the past year. Faculty members at TESC provide extensive narratives evaluating student performance, and students offer feedback to faculty members on their teaching. At Alverno College, assessment, collaborative problem solving, and improvement shape virtually everything that happens at the institution. There may be no more important role for a department chair than helping to cultivate a working environment where getting better every day – as a teacher, learner, scholar, advisor – becomes the norm and curricular decisions are informed by assessment data.

Questions to Ponder:

There is no blueprint for creating a student success-oriented institution, nor is there a specific formula that department chairs should follow. But by pondering some questions department chairs may come to realize what they can do to positively influence student learning and the educational effectiveness of their unit.

1. Does the department hold to a talent development view of students and their learning?
2. How are new faculty recruited and socialized? What steps are taken to be sure they understand departmental and institutional performance expectations?
3. What mechanisms are in place for students to learn from other students?
4. Does your department have one or more learning communities? If so, are they working well? In not, what challenges need to be addressed to enhance their effectiveness?
5. When new funds are available, how are they allocated?
6. How does your department measure the impact of curricular changes or other innovations? Is your department improving? How do you know?

Answers to these questions and others 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 20 diverse, educationally effective college and universities do to promote student success. The Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project was supported with generous grants from 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 these colleges and universities are discussed along with a wide array of effective educational policies and practices that if 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 for Student Success: An Inventory to Enhance Educational Effectiveness*, 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.

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