STUDENT SUCCESS in COLLEGE

Promoting Student Success

What New Faculty Need to Know

Barbara L. Cambridge

Occasional Paper #12

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

S tarting a new position is exhilarating. The key challenge is to make the strange familiar as soon as possible. There are new policies to learn, new colleagues to get to know, and new surroundings to adapt to. All these aspects and more need to be understood and managed well in order to focus on the primary task at hand – teaching and learning. Of all that is new, to what should you attend first if you are committed to creating the conditions under which students learn best? How can you use your institution's resources to help your students take advantage of opportunities to deepen their learning?

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 demonstrated through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) that they have effective policies and practices for working with students of differing abilities and aspirations. Consider adapting some of their approaches to assist new faculty at your institution.

National Survey of Student Engagement

1. *Take the mission statement seriously*

Mission statements are sometimes seen as the concern of administrators rather than faculty members, but that attribution sells short the power of the mission statement. Instead of relegating their mission statements to use only by a few people or only on ceremonial occasions, faculty members at strong performing campuses enact the mission on a daily basis; indeed, they are "living mission statements." Faculty and staff members cite the mission statement as they speak about what they do, refer to the mission statement in their syllabi, and embrace the particular emphases of their institution's statement. For example, Gonzaga University's engagement in heated discussion and quiet reflection about its identity as both a regional Catholic university and a national presence helped faculty members claim the core values of a Jesuit education. These values under gird faculty decisions about pedagogy and curricula.

As you learn to embody the mission of your institution in your work, you need to discover how the mission already gets enacted in this particular setting. Putting aside blinders of previous expectations, you can focus on the realities of this campus. If you come from another kind of institution or expect students just like those from the institution you attended, you may need to widen your vision to understand another kind of institution and to focus your vision to understand and affirm your real students. For example, at George Mason University, faculty development workshops include an emphasis on understanding GMU students, who are often commuting, working, and caring for families.

As a new member of the campus community, you can bring fresh eyes to the mission, adding to the campus's commitment to its mission and its students. It is important also, however, to understand the current ways in which the mission is central to the policies and practices of your institution.

2. *Think of yourself as an integral cord in the institution's safety net for students*

To do this, you need to first become familiar with the academic and social support programs and resources available on your campus. Although your first reaction may be that it is often difficult to learn about your own department or unit, campus programs and resources may be just the help that you and your students need. For example, what services does the library have to help your students sort through all that is available on the Internet?

Where can you refer a student who is dyslexic? And where does a student go who needs technical help with producing a video for a class project?

Strong performing campuses are aware particularly of the needs of their incoming students. They provide a dense web of student success-oriented initiatives held together by redundant early warning systems and safety nets. For example, Ursinus College has a team of two or more staff or faculty members who contact a student individually if they sense that the student is struggling. At the University of Texas at El Paso, an Entering Student Program brings together in one place all the services that an entering student needs, including new student orientation, the Academic Advising Center, and the Tutoring and Learning Center. Other colleges, like Fayetteville State University, have a University College that provides specialized advising and learning assistance programs. Students can access such programs and services at your institution if you yourself know about them and alert students who need them about the services.

3. *Learn the special qualities of your campus culture*

> " Supportive educators are virtually everywhere at strong performing institutions—teaching faculty, residence life staff, groundskeepers, and presidents… They are sensitive to what is and is not effective through reflecting on their experiences and are open to adopting or adapting good ideas from their colleagues elsewhere."

When done well, rituals can portray in powerful ways what a campus values. Special convenings and campus-specific terms of endearment and other language help evoke an institution's identity and go a long way to supporting a sense of community. Celebrations of scholarship are widespread practices at strong performing institutions. The University of Michigan's Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program conference is a popular campus event where students present research in poster sessions. Wabash College's Celebration of Student Research, Scholarship, and Creative Work features scientific research, poetry reading, dance, and music. Held when the Board of Trustees meets and classes are cancelled, it has become a campus tradition. In yet another annual event, Miami University's Summer Scholars Symposium presents summer projects to students, faculty, and staff. Seek out the rituals and celebrations on your campus that you and your students can participate in for affirmation of learning. Space and location can be aesthetically and educationally important. For example, faculty know the cultural significance of landmarks and architectural features like Jayhawk Boulevard at the University of Kansas, the coherent brick buildings at Miami University, or the distinctive Bhutanese architecture at the University of Texas El Paso. George Mason takes advantage of its urban setting for service learning; University of Maine Farmington, its rural setting for

environmental education. Learn about how the attributes of your campus shape the emotional and educational experiences of your students.

4. *Pay attention to information supplied to you about the campus*

The two pager from the institutional researcher who summarizes alumni survey data may seem unimportant in the midst of preparing for the next day of a class you are teaching for the first time. At that point it may be. But, return to the two-pager because learning about how the educational experience of your institution is viewed by those who have graduated can help in your decision making as you refashion that course. What content proved helpful as students entered the work world? What realizations about the value of certain content were delayed but very important in the lives of graduates? Absorbing as much relevant information as possible about who your students are and what they want and need will in the long run help you improve your teaching and service to students.

5. *Partner with other educators on your campus and get to know those faculty, staff, and administrators whom you see as innovative and student-oriented*

Supportive educators are virtually everywhere at strong performing institutions—teaching faculty, residence life staff, groundskeepers, and presidents. Bound together by a shared talent development philosophy, they are sensitive to what is and is not effective through reflecting on their experiences and are open to adopting or adapting good ideas from their colleagues elsewhere. Students are often a source of good ideas, such as those at Wheaton College where students play important roles in curriculum revision and educational policy. At the University of Maine Farmington, students are intentionally included in decision-making bodies so that faculty can learn from and with them, and at the same time students develop their leadership talents. An apocryphal story comes from Wofford College, where a graduating student introduced her parents to the two most influential persons for her as an undergraduate: the college president and Miss Rita, who runs a coffee shop in the Science Center and dispenses advice about academic performance and social life to all students who come her way. When a philosophy of learning is aligned across a campus and all educators enact it, students are more likely to see coherence in their learning inside and outside the classroom.

6. *Provide frequent and timely feedback to students about their performance*

"But I have so many students; how can I write comments on papers—or even assign them?" Research makes clear that frequent and timely feedback helps students to

improve, but you need to develop response strategies that can work in the reality of your teaching or work responsibilities. Find out what your colleagues who teach large classes or who include multiple assignments in courses do to respond in helpful ways to their students.

Students at strong performing colleges frequently comment on the importance of useful feedback. At California State University Monterey Bay, where many students live off-campus, that feedback is often on line so that it is readily accessible. At Sweet Briar College, students emphasize the quality of feedback that indicates ways to improve within a climate of high expectations. At The Evergreen State College, the practice of feedback is reciprocal: faculty members give extensive narrative feedback to students, and students offer feedback to faculty members on their teaching. You can model the importance of giving and of using feedback by asking your students about the helpfulness of your feedback to them and by telling them in what ways you are using their ideas to improve your own teaching.

7. *Don't be afraid of the "A" word*

Too many faculty and staff members who hear "assessment" immediately assume it is an unnecessary intrusion into academic freedom or an unwanted extension of administrative accountability. But think again. You want students to do well. You need to know how your teaching is helping or hindering your students' learning, and there are formal and informal ways to obtain this information.

Strong performing campuses have what may be called positive restlessness. They want to improve. For example, team teaching faculty members at Evergreen College reinvent their courses annually based on data from the past year. Faculty Learning Communities at Miami University focus on various topics, including assessing student learning in core courses. At Alverno College, assessment, collaborative problem solving, and improvement occur as part of a systematic ongoing process that shapes virtually every aspect of the institution. Through assessment, educators are able to create better conditions for learning and for helping students know how their learning is progressing.

8. *Show that you value teaching and learning by taking advantage of and contributing to faculty development activities*

Although you may have thrived in lecture-based graduate education, you need additional pedagogical strategies to engage the range of students in your college or university. When you are so busy as a new faculty member, you may be tempted to revert to what you experienced in graduate classes. If you need help in implementing alternatives, turn to the faculty development activities provided on your campus.

Collaborative, problem-based, service, and portfolio learning embody principles of learning clearly established in literature and practice. They acknowledge the importance of active learning and the varied ways students learn. For example, at Macalester, Sewanee, Wheaton, and Wofford, pre-enrollment summer reading activities establish the kind of intense discussions that will mark students' classes. George Mason's New Century College, Michigan's living learning centers, and Gonzaga's academic living communities offer interactive learning experiences. Find out what your campus does to encourage active learning and be a part of its initiatives.

Pressures on faculty for traditional research can divert attention from the central responsibility to educate students. At the beginning of your time on campus, establish that you value student learning and assert your need for attention, development, and assurance that can help you contribute to student learning.

Questions to Ponder:

1. List the people and units that you already know about that can help you be an effective teacher. What plan do you have to call on these resources?

2. Does your department, school, or college have teaching circles? Would you want to start one, perhaps with other new faculty members, to discuss teaching and learning issues and provide mutual support? Are there other practices that put you in regular contact with faculty and staff members with whom you can share challenges and triumphs

3. Pretend that you are writing a letter to a graduate school friend who is now teaching at another institution. What physical features of your campus and what rituals and traditions can you describe to that person to introduce her to your campus? Why are the ones you mention important to your introduction?

4. How have you built feedback into your classes

5. How are you building a support system among people in many roles on your campus? How are you getting to know people?

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 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.

Sources:

Kuh, G.D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J.H., & Whitt, E.J. (in press). *Assessing conditions to enhance educational effectiveness: The Inventory for Student Engagement and Success*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E. J. & Associates (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Barbara L. Cambridge is Senior Program Officer for the National Council of Teachers of English.

For additional briefs
**visit NSSE Institute Project DEEP Related Papers,
http://nsse.iub.edu/institute/**

Cite as: Cambridge, B. L. (2005). *Promoting student success: What new faculty need to know* (Occasional Paper No. 12). Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.

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)