

# STUDENT SUCCESS *in* COLLEGE

Promoting Student Success

## What SHEEOs and System Heads 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



States benefit considerably when their stocks of “educational capital” grow. From a workforce and tax revenue standpoint, state rates of return on baccalaureate education are far higher than those associated with any other educational step. Additional benefits attributable to higher education—ranging from enhancements in citizen participation to improved health and avoidance of public support—are equally easy to document. It is thus in every state’s interest to increase the numbers of its citizens who attain a baccalaureate degree. And it is equally in every state’s interest to ensure that those who do earn a degree have experienced the kind of high quality learning environments that yield levels of knowledge and skills that are nationally and internationally competitive.

Every college and university can improve its graduation rates and enhance the quality of its undergraduate programs by creating the conditions that matter to student success. Decades of research studies show that one key factor is student engagement—the time and effort that students devote to their studies and related activities. Institutions can organize their classes and other learning opportunities so that students put more effort in and benefit more from such activities. SHEEOs and System Heads can do their part by ensuring that matters of undergraduate quality and student success remain central to the state’s approaches to planning, resource allocation, and accountability. And while their direct responsibility remains largely confined to public institutions, they can increasingly establish policies that affect independent institutions as well.



National Survey  
of Student Engagement

The suggestions offered here are based on state-level experience with using results of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), as well as an in-depth examination of twenty diverse four-year colleges and universities that have higher-than-predicted graduation rates and levels of performance with respect to various dimensions of student engagement.

### **1. Keep focused on mission and how mission is enacted**

A primary SHEEO responsibility is to ensure that public colleges and universities remain focused on the missions that they established to pursue. In all cases, these missions are prominently (and sometimes exclusively) oriented toward undergraduate education. All too often, institutions do not maintain this focus, resulting in unconscious “mission drift” toward graduate education and research.

It is important to remember that every institution has two missions. The first is its espoused mission, or what it writes about itself. The second is its enacted mission, or what the institution does in terms of programs or practices.

The enacted mission is more relevant to student success because it reflects what students actually experience. At strong performing public universities, the enacted mission overlaps considerably with the espoused mission. For example, California State University at Monterey Bay, Winston-Salem State University, and the University of Texas at El Paso are dedicated to expanding educational opportunities for students who by traditional measures are not expected to

succeed in higher education. The University of Michigan and the University of Kansas maintain their standing among their research university peers while at the same time embodying an enacted mission that emphasizes undergraduate student success. Michigan demonstrated this commitment by undertaking six major studies of the quality of the undergraduate experience between 1985 and 2002. In the early 1990s, Kansas began to change the way faculty are evaluated for promotion and tenure to bring undergraduate teaching into better balance with research productivity.

SHEEO agencies and System Offices have a primary responsibility to ensure that the espoused and enacted missions of *all* public institutions emphasize the quality of undergraduate education. It is especially important that four-year and masters-level public institutions maintain their assigned focus and avoid attempts to “climb the ladder” of reputation by enacting missions that increasingly de-emphasize undergraduate, lower-division work.

### **2. Measure what you value**

Accountability systems for public colleges and universities send strong signals about what state authorities value in higher education. Traditionally, the kinds of information that institutions are called upon to report through such systems are based on resource use and efficiency measures such as instructional costs, student-faculty ratios, or persistence rates. But what really matters in college are factors like the experiences that students encounter, the rigor and content of the curriculum, and how much support students are given to engage in learning.

Using survey results like those generated by NSSE as part of an overall accountability reporting system can help remedy this condition by calling public attention to undergraduate quality. The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education and the State University System for South Dakota, for example, periodically underwrite the costs of administering the NSSE at all the state’s four-year institutions and prominently displays results on the agency websites. SHEEO agencies engaging in program review, or asking institutions to engage in it, should ensure that

such periodic in-depth investigations of curriculum require a deliberate look at student engagement.

SHEEO agencies and System Offices can also encourage institutions to assess student engagement independently, even if reporting is not part of a statewide system. For example, the State Council for Higher Education in Virginia encourages the use of NSSE by institutions as part of individually-tailored accountability reporting.

SHEEO agencies can also encourage institutions to make assessments of student engagement public, using well-tryed examples of how to do so. For instance, Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI), Portland State University, and the University of Massachusetts Boston recently concluded an “institutional portfolio” project in which participating urban universities constructed web-based displays containing a range of performance measures, among them results of student engagement studies. These “portfolios” were then reviewed by a number of external stakeholders including SHEEO agencies and accrediting organizations to demonstrate responsiveness. Finally, SHEEO agencies and System Offices can encourage institutions to report information on student engagement in a coherent form to prospective students and their parents. Public reporting of this kind provides a useful antidote to “quality rankings” based solely on resources and reputation, which are frequently misleading.

### **3. Invest in engagement**

If the agency has budgetary authority, the resource allocation process represents one of the most powerful

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levers a SHEEO can have over institutional behavior. Yet most state funding processes are driven by enrollments—a situation that covers additional cost, to be sure, but that provides incentives only to grow and not to improve. Led by Tennessee in the early 1980s, many states have attempted to remedy this condition by engaging in “performance funding” or “performance budgeting.” In the former, institutional performance is measured directly through a range of statistical indicators and additional funds are allocated to institutions in proportion to how well institutions do on these measures. In the latter, states invest strategically in institutions—funding them up front to establish particular kinds of programs or to engage in particular kinds of actions.

SHEEOs can use the resource allocation process to induce institutions to improve engagement indirectly through performance budgeting. The University of Wisconsin and the Minnesota State College and University System, among others, provide grant support for institutions to underwrite faculty development to improve teaching. Other states and systems have supported service learning or similar initiatives aimed at enriching curricular experiences that research has linked to higher achievement. Sometimes such enhancements are individualized by institutions in the form of “mission enhancement” funds (as, for example, in Missouri) or institutional compacts negotiated between institutions and the SHEEO agency (as, for example, in Colorado, Kansas, and Virginia). Statewide results of student engagement studies can also help SHEEO agencies better target directed resources of this kind by pointing out more precisely which kinds of student populations are most at risk or least engaged. Finally, SHEEO agencies can sponsor conferences and workshops on a statewide basis that provide a venue for faculty and academic leaders to discuss assessment and undergraduate improvement. For example, coordinating boards in Virginia, Washington, New Mexico, and Colorado (and, until recently, South Carolina) fund annual conferences on student assessment in which information on student engagement is routinely discussed.

The realities of institutional funding demand that resource allocation reflect actual costs. This means that SHEEO agencies have little choice but to allocate the bulk of available resources to support enrollment. But every agency retains some discretion over how such resources are distributed and should therefore (a) periodically review its allocation formulae and approaches to determine how they provide incentives for institutions to devote attention to undergraduate quality and, (b) seek multiple opportunities to strategically direct up to 5% of available funds toward institutional and statewide activities designed explicitly to foster engaged curricula and pedagogy.

#### 4. *Align your efforts*

Just like institutions, state governing and coordinating boards sometimes find their activities segmented into distinct categories that have little to do with one another. SHEEO agencies, for instance, usually have separate, free-standing processes to deal with such matters as governance, resource allocation, and accountability. Policies in each of these areas may be rational within their confines, but together they may send contradictory signals about undergraduate quality. To help counteract such tendencies, organizations like the Education Commission of the States (ECS) recommend that states periodically undertake “policy audits” to examine their approaches systematically in the light of a particular state policy objective like improving undergraduate education. One component of a policy audit involves looking at the entire range of policies in governance, funding, accountability reporting, state-funded financial aid, capital construction, and legal affairs *together* to determine the pattern of incentives they provide to institutions for improving undergraduate education. Another component typically involves interviewing practitioners at the institutional level to determine perceived obstacles and inducements to improve student engagement and support associated with particular state policies. Results are then combined to provide a more conscious, articulated, and aligned approach to state higher education policy. Recent examples of policy audits conducted under the auspices of the National Collaborative for Postsecondary Education Policy include Missouri, Washington, Virginia, West Virginia, and Rhode Island.

SHEEO agencies should also recognize explicitly that there are other stakeholders interested in improving undergraduate quality. Probably the most influential are accrediting organizations, all of which now call on institutions to produce more evidence of quality experiences and outcomes for students. These new demands are particularly salient because they affect private institutions as well as public colleges and universities. SHEEOs should be aware of the requirements of relevant accreditors in this regard, and can encourage and help institutions to meet them willingly and effectively. The West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission, for example, recently undertook a consulting effort on institutional assessment efforts at all the state’s public institutions to help them prepare to meet new evidence requirements established by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. North Dakota and Wisconsin are examples of similar state initiatives designed to link SHEEO interests in undergraduate quality with the institutional leverage provided by accreditation.

#### 5. *Stay the course*

New realities of funding and politics have severely challenged SHEEO agencies in recent years. State revenues are scarce and are spread increasingly thinly

across mandated expenditure areas like Medicare reimbursement and K-12 funding; under such circumstances, higher education is frequently the “budget balancer” and may suffer as a consequence. Meanwhile, term limits and increasingly virulent partisanship hamper attempts to create coherent, long-lasting higher education policy in many states. At the same time, SHEEOs should remember that colleges and universities do not become high-performing institutions overnight. Generally, they are characterized by dedicated cadres of faculty and top administrators who work on key initiatives for extended periods of time in order to demonstrate and enhance their impact. Though they do their work locally, these individuals operate in the context of a larger environment that is shaped in part what state agencies do. As a result, SHEEOs should wherever possible recognize such efforts and showcase them publicly. And they should try to keep their own incentives for improvement in place for long enough periods of time to really make a difference.

**Questions to Ponder:**

There is no one blueprint for creating a student success-oriented institution. But thinking about how these suggestions may apply to your own state could make a positive difference in student learning.

1. To what extent do state policy statements about higher education clearly emphasize student success
2. Where do students and their learning fall in terms of governing or coordinating board priorities? Are matters of student success and engagement regularly considered, along with more familiar topics like governance or resource allocation?
3. Does institutional accountability reporting address the quality of student experience? What would have to happen to include such measures?
4. How does the state’s approach to resource allocation provide institutions with incentives to improve undergraduate education? What kinds of directed investments might help improve student engagement and success?
5. Are state policies affecting higher education aligned with one another to provide a coherent set of

- incentives around undergraduate quality and success?
6. How might the leverage provided by changing accreditation requirements be harnessed by state agencies to help institutions improve?

Descriptions of different types of strong performing institutions around the country are offered in *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter*. The book features 20 diverse, educationally effective colleges and universities. The Documenting Effective Educational Practices (DEEP) project was supported by generous grants from Lumina Foundation for Education and the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. 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 and support a culture that supports student success. This book can be used by SHEEOs as a guide to the practices at the institutional level that their policies and actions should seek to foster. A companion volume, *Assessing Conditions for Student Success: An Inventory to Enhance Educational Effectiveness*, will be available in September 2005 and provides a template to identify particular areas of institutional functioning that can be improved to promote student success.

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