STUDENT SUCCESS *in* COLLEGE

Promoting Student Success

What Business Leaders Can Do

Clara M. Lovett

Occasional Paper #16

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

More than any other group of stakeholders, business leaders are aware that this country's ability to remain competitive in a global, technology-based economy is ever more closely tied to its ability to produce more and better prepared college graduates. Graduating more students from various backgrounds who are well prepared to meet the social, civic and economic challenges of the future is a national priority.

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 student engagement – the time and effort that students devote to their studies and related activities – is a key factor in student success. The Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project gathered data from 20 very different institutions of higher learning whose student scores on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) were higher than what was predicted on the basis of their student and institutional profile, history, and other factors.

National Survey of Student Engagement

Project DEEP was supported by generous grants from Lumina Foundation for Education and the Center for Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. Altogether, a 24-member research team interviewed more than 2,700 people during its 40 multiple-day site visits to the DEEP schools.

The findings of Project DEEP are reported by Indiana University's George Kuh and the project research team in the book, *Student Success in College.* The rationale for documenting and disseminating best practices leading to student success is laid out succinctly in the book's preface (p. xiii): "The college-going stakes are higher today than at any point in history, both in terms of costs and potential benefits to students and society … The task is to do something on a scale never before realized …"

The value of Project DEEP lies in challenging common assumptions about the keys to student success in college. Among them is the assumption that "the surest way to increase the number of 'successful' students – those who persist, benefit in desired ways from their college experience, are satisfied with college, and graduate – is to admit only well-prepared, academically talented students," (p. 8). In today's society, Kuh and his colleagues remind us, that it is no longer "either a solution or an option."

Student Success in College documents how different kinds of institutions with very different missions and student demographics can create "conditions that matter" in student engagement and student success. At these institutions, business leaders have many opportunities to work with other stakeholders to create "conditions that matter."

> **"The college-going stakes are higher today than at any point in history, both in terms of costs and potential benefits to students and society … The task is to do something on a scale never before realized …"**

Business leaders as major stakeholders.

Some of the institutional policies and practices that foster student success are most relevant to faculty and other academic professionals who make choices about curriculum and the deployment of human and material resources within each institution. But there is much in Project DEEP that illustrates ways of learning and sharing knowledge. These practices are good predictors of persistence to graduation and even better predictors of how effectively the graduates will perform as citizens and members of the workforce. These findings can not only provide useful insights for prospective employers of college graduates, they can also provide practical guidance for business leaders who interact with colleges and universities in different capacities.

1. As trustees of colleges and universities, business leaders already play key roles in the recruitment and retention of higher education's CEOs. In this capacity, they can ensure that student success is a high priority for prospective CEOs. They can also look for evidence that the prospective CEOs can chart pathways to student success that are appropriate for the mission, history and demographic profile of their institution. They can look for evidence of imaginative and innovative approaches to undergraduate education that are effective with all types of students, particularly those from underrepresented groups. Such evidence should be used to measure the performance of the campus executive officer.

2. As advisors to presidents, provosts and deans, for specific degree programs, business leaders have many opportunities to make the curriculum more relevant to the lives of students and the needs of employers, to ask key questions about the value added of specific college majors, and to insist on seeing evidence

that graduates can think critically, solve problems, and work in teams. Thus, for example, at George Mason University each school has its own advisory committee of professional and business leaders from the region, who help infuse community needs and issues into the curriculum.

3. *As community leaders,* business leaders who understand what it means to create "conditions that matter" can be invaluable advocates for the institution within their cities, regions, and states. They can also help campus leaders remain focused on student success in the face of pressures from other stakeholders who may wish to divert energies and resources to achieve higher rankings in national magazines. Thus, for example, at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) the support of the local business community has made it possible for the administration to focus on UTEP's mission as a Hispanic-serving institution, a strategy that for many years met resistance from internal campus constituencies. In a quite different setting, Alverno College involves approximately 400 community volunteers each year as "external assessors" of the students' educational development. External assessors participate in extensive training for this role and describe their experience as a powerful learning opportunity.

4. *As donors to colleges and universities,* business leaders potentially can make as much of an impact on "conditions that matter" as they do through the process of appointing and retaining CEOs. Endowment gifts and matching gifts, in particular, can be configured specifically to support one or more of the practices documented in *Student Success in College.* Sometimes, small amounts of money can create enriching educational experiences. For example, small gifts enabled the faculty at Wofford College to develop an institutional framework for learning communities. Once this was in place, the college was ready to compete for larger external grants. At Wheaton College, the provost used

seed money to launch an institution-wide conversation about curriculum structured to promote faculty and student engagement. Several DEEP campuses sought advice and financial help from business leaders to achieve the "distributed leadership" necessary to foster student success. Indeed, a common finding of the DEEP project is that gifts structured to support the learning experience and increase student success have greater impact on the institution than larger gifts for traditional brick-and-mortar projects. Equally important, gifts at any level can be configured to commit the institution to continuous improvement and accountability for learning outcomes.

5. *As experiential learning experts and internship providers,* business leaders can create applied learning experiences that bring abstract concepts to life for students. At Longwood University, for example, a faculty member and a local broker advise students in the Lancer Student Investment Fund who manage $250,000 of the institutional portfolio and make presentations to its Board of Visitors and Foundation Board. At George Mason University, a coalition of business, professional and public sector organizations fosters collaboration between the university and its community and provides opportunities for students to network, identify opportunities for internships, and hone their job-hunting skills. Internships, in particular, allow students to practice what they are learning in the classroom, develop leadership skills, and work with people from different backgrounds. At Macalester College, more than half the students complete internships in the Twin Cities metropolitan area and participate with faculty members in research projects requested by local entities, especially in economically depressed areas. The Filene Center for Work and Learning at Wheaton College coordinates internships and service learning activities. It is an example of how the involvement of business and other community leaders in sponsoring sites, mentoring, and other resources provides enriching experiences for the students that the College alone could neither construct nor fund.

Questions to Ponder:

Although there is no single blueprint for creating a student success-oriented institution, many of the lessons from Project DEEP can make a positive difference. In their interactions with all campus constituencies responsible for student success, business leaders might ask the following questions:

1. Does the institutional mission statement clearly and unequivocally emphasize student success?

2. What leading indicators are used to document that the mission statement is, in fact, understood by all constituencies and acted upon?

3. Who is responsible for public conversations about "conditions that matter" and who monitors progress or lack thereof?

From the experiences of 20 colleges and universities included in DEEP, the authors of *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter* have identified six properties and conditions and a wide array of campus policies and practices. If adapted, these can help other campuses create and sustain a culture of student success. Business leaders might be particularly interested in using the book in strategic planning and mission

clarification exercises. 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:

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.

Clara M. Lovett is President Emerita, Northern Arizona University.

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)