

# Student Success



*A Union of Professionals*

**AFT Higher Education**

## Student Success in Higher Education



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## AFT Higher Education

A Division of the American Federation of Teachers

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# Foreword

**T**HE MOST CRITICAL ISSUE FACING HIGHER education today is how to provide access to instruction and services that will enable many more students to fulfill their postsecondary aspirations. Education, being both a public and a private good, brings together many of the forces of change in our society and creates vast and unceasing debate. The paper you are about to read, prepared by the higher education leadership of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), states what we think needs to be done to help college students achieve educational success. The AFT is a national union of 1.5 million members that includes approximately 175,000 faculty and professional staff members in the nation's colleges and universities.

As chairwoman of the national AFT Higher Education program and policy council, I invite you to engage in our discussion and in activities that will result from it. As the president of AFT Washington, a previous president of AFT Seattle Community College, Local 1789 and as a part-time, then a full-time professor of English at my institution, I have had unique opportunities to observe faculty, staff, administrations, education bureaucracies and students at their work. I know that we want to work together for the common good—the good of our profession, our institutions and the people we teach.

As a leader of a representative union, I understand the union's responsibility to further the interests of our members. A large part of that consists of working to ensure that the labor of AFT members is well compensated and that their employment conditions are fair, secure and rewarding.

But that is far from all of it. The AFT is also a union which believes that advancing the interests of our members means furthering their professional as well as their economic objectives—and it is not an exaggeration to say that student success is what AFT Higher Education members are all about. Making a difference in the lives of students is why faculty and staff members choose to be in the academy, why they go to work each day, why they keep up with the latest scholarship in their disciplines, why they spend so much time meeting with students and assessing their work. Day in and day out, the nation's college faculty and staff demonstrate a high level of personal and professional commitment to students, to higher education, to their communities and to the future of the world we live in. The following report is issued in the spirit of that commitment.

SANDRA SCHROEDER  
*March 2011*

# Executive Summary

THE FOLLOWING THREE PAGES PROVIDE AN OVERVIEW OF AFT HIGHER EDUCATION'S PLAN TO HELP STUDENTS LEARN HOW TO GET MORE OUT OF THEIR COLLEGE EXPERIENCE.



**I**N 2010, AFT PRESIDENT RANDI WEINGARTEN AND THE union's college and university leadership began planning an initiative to demonstrate the union's ongoing commitment to place student success at the center of its higher education agenda. The initiative, still in its early stages, reflects and draws upon the work of our members, the frontline faculty and staff who make a positive difference in the lives of their students every day. It also draws upon what students tell us they want and need from their college experience, reinforced by the results of student focus groups conducted for AFT to launch the initiative.

College student success is a major issue today in government and policy circles. AFT members agree that a renewed emphasis on student success is critical because, as President Obama stresses, the number of students with a college education is not as high as it should be, and college student retention rates are not as high as any educator would want them to be. The gap in college student success among various racial and ethnic groups also is unacceptably large.

A major aim of the student success initiative is to more effectively bring the voice of frontline faculty and staff—along with their knowledge of pedagogy and their experience with students—into the growing policy debate over college curriculum, teaching and assessment. The work began by conducting the student focus groups and engaging with key policymakers and experts in the field. Other initial aspects of the initiative include the development of a national website and data center on student success issues ([www.whatshouldcount.org](http://www.whatshouldcount.org)) and an effort to help AFT Higher Education affiliates consider developing activities oriented toward student success on their own campuses. The report you are about to read is an important component of the initiative, representing the union's first effort to delineate key elements of college student success, to suggest ways to implement effective programs, and to outline the roles and responsibilities of all higher education stakeholders in achieving student success.

## Origins—and Shortcomings—of the National Focus on Student Success

Much of the attention in higher education policy circles today is focused on how to help more students gain access to higher education and then succeed by attaining a degree or certificate. Over the years, most of the work focused on the access side of the equation, particularly on

ensuring an adequate level of federal student aid as well as state institutional support. Now, in the face of dwindling public resources, the policy debate has increasingly shifted from “access” to “success” issues, such as retention and evidence of learning outcomes—in other words, to what happens to students after they enter college. The general emphasis has been on holding institutions accountable for achieving measurable outputs—like high graduation rates and standardized test scores—and on developing various curriculum frameworks. However, AFT members believe there are some significant problems in today's public discourse about accountability and outcomes.

- First, on the technical level, there are very serious problems with the federal formula for computing graduation rates and with the validity of various testing measures and their impact on the curriculum.
- Second, too many policy discussions of student success avoid serious consideration of financial factors, as though investment in learning is not connected to student success. To the contrary—the at-risk population of nontraditional students who participated in the recent AFT focus groups demonstrates the intricate connection between student success and resources. These students report, for example, that paying for college is just about the biggest obstacle they face in completing their studies. Concerns about finances also lead students to work too many hours, which hampers their chances for success. Finally, students report that large class sizes, limited course offerings and difficulty in getting enough personal attention from overworked faculty and staff are key obstacles to their achievement.
- Third, too many policy discussions about accountability have failed to incorporate the views and experiences of frontline faculty and staff. The AFT believes that the disengagement between workers on the ground and the accountability movement needs to be addressed if we are to achieve positive and lasting results for students.

## Approaching Student Success

How, then, should the academy approach today's student success issues?

- First, the work must begin with a shared understanding at the institutional level of how student success is to be defined. AFT members approach student success in broader

terms than quick degree attainment or high standardized test scores—they usually define student success as the achievement of the student’s own, often developing, education goals. Our members not only teach students who may be on track to obtain degrees or certificates, but they also teach students who are looking primarily for job training without earning a formal credential or for the acquisition of professional skills to enhance their career opportunities. Other students are studying academic subjects strictly for learning’s sake. Adding to the complexity, students often adjust their goals throughout their college years. For these reasons, measuring student success solely in terms of degree attainment reflects a misunderstanding of today’s academy. To understand the realities of student success, we must begin to identify ways to elicit information on student goals throughout the educational process and to ensure that reliable data on student goals are fed back into the curriculum development and assessment processes. It is also important—and specifically called for by the students who participated in our focus groups—to ensure that students have multiple opportunities to assess and reassess their goals through a rich process of advisement or counseling.

- Second, campus discussions on student success should be undertaken with a clear recognition of the thoughtful work on curriculum and assessment already going on at most campuses, and with a commitment not to be perpetually reinventing the wheel.
- Third, once a broad understanding of student success is achieved, professionals at the institutional level need to collaborate systematically on curriculum and assessment in accordance with this understanding—, with faculty and professional staff in the lead. Because institutional missions and student bodies are so diverse, and because it is important to capitalize on the mix of faculty expertise particular to each institution, the AFT believes that planning for student success should be conducted at the institutional level rather than across institutions or at the state or national levels. In this regard, our members reject the idea that institutional outputs can be compared easily like the ingredients on a cereal box. The one constant in higher education is diversity, not uniformity, and diversity is also its greatest strength.
- Fourth, collaboration should proceed with an understanding that frontline faculty members and staff should drive the processes of curriculum development, teaching and assessment to ensure that education practices are effective and practical in the real-life classroom.

The AFT student success report delineates a number of common elements of student success cutting across dif-

ferent programs and disciplines that the union believes can be viewed as a framework for the type of educational experience all students should have in some form. Those elements, described in greater detail in the report, include:

- Exposure to **knowledge** in a variety of areas;
- The development of **intellectual abilities** necessary for gathering information and processing it; and
- **Applied skills**, both professional and technical. These elements are laid out in a chart on page XX.

In our view, these elements offer one acceptable framework (certainly not the only one) to focus professional thinking, collaboration and planning around curriculum, teaching and assessment. In any case, however, the specific categories and details are not the most important thing. The most important thing is to have a deliberative and intentional perspective among individual faculty members and the institution’s body of faculty based on advance planning and collaboration—and also on the evidence from focus groups that students want and benefit from a high degree of clarity and interconnection in their coursework.

## Implementation

To ensure that curriculum and assessment materials translate into real gains for students, the report recommends that:

- Faculty should be responsible for leading discussions about how the elements of student success are further articulated and refined to help students at their institution succeed.
- The implementation process should respect the principles of academic freedom.
- Professional staff should be closely involved in the process, particularly with regard to how the elements will be articulated vis-à-vis academic advising and career counseling.
- Implementing common elements for student success not only should respect differences among disciplines and programs, but also should strive for an integrated educational experience for students.
- New curriculum frameworks, assessments or accountability mechanisms should not re-create the wheel;
- Assessing the effectiveness of this process should focus on student success, academic programs and student services but should not be used to evaluate the performance of individual faculty or staff.

## Roles, Responsibilities and Accountability

AFT members overwhelmingly favor reasonable accountability mechanisms; they also believe that accountability needs to flow naturally from clearly delineated responsibilities, including the responsibility faculty and staff have in the learning process. It takes the work of many stakeholders to produce a successful educational experience. Each stakeholder has unique responsibilities as well as a shared responsibility to work collaboratively with the other stakeholders. This report puts forward a listing of roles and responsibilities focused on four groups of stakeholders—faculty and staff members, institutional administrators, students and government. Under this kind of rubric, individual stakeholders have clear responsibilities for which they can be held accountable, and no individual stakeholder is solely responsible for achieving ends only partly in his or her control.

## Retention and Attainment

Much of the policy debate on accountability has been tied to the idea that college attainment and completion rates are too low. Even though the measurement of graduation rates is deeply flawed, AFT members fully agree that retention is not what it should be and that some action must be taken to improve the situation. Our recommendations include:

**1. Strengthen preparation in preK-12 by increasing the public support provided to school systems and the professionals who work in them.** As noted earlier, college faculty and staff at the postsecondary and preK-12 levels should be provided financial and professional support to coordinate standards between the two systems and minimize disjunctions.

**2. Strengthen federal and state student assistance so students can afford to enter college and remain with their studies despite other obligations.** Again, students report that paying for college is an overwhelming challenge, and that they must work a significant number of hours to support their academic career, often at the expense of fully benefiting from their classes. We cannot expect to keep balancing the books in higher education by charging students out-of-reach tuition and dismantling government and institutional support for a healthy system of academic staffing.

**3. Institute or expand student success criteria along the lines of the student success elements described earlier (or an equally valid one).** This is best based on deliberate, multidisciplinary planning in individual institutions led by frontline faculty and staff. Given that another one of students' most called-for needs is assistance with developing a clear path toward their education goals, the aim is to provide clarity to the educational experience for students along with other stakeholders, including government and the general public.

**4. Coordinate learning objectives with student assessment.** The desire to compare learning across different institutions on a single scale is understandable. However, we believe that student learning would be diminished, not enhanced, by administering national assessments that overly homogenize "success" to what is easily measurable and comparable.

**5. Provide greater government funding and reassess current expenditure policies to increase support for instruction and staffing.** We cannot expect student success when institutions are not devoting resources to a healthy staffing system and are allowing students' education to be built on the exploitation of contingent labor and the loss of full-time jobs. The system of higher education finance needs to be re-examined so colleges and universities can fulfill the nation's higher education attainment goals.

**6. Improve the longitudinal tracking of students** as they make their way through the educational system and out into the world beyond. The current federal graduation formula is much too narrow. We need to look at all students over a more substantial period of time, and we have to take into account the great diversity in student goals if we are to account properly for student success.

In conclusion, the AFT believes that academic unions, working with other stakeholders, can play a central role in promoting student success. Making lasting progress, however, will have to begin at tables where faculty and staff members hold a position of respect and leadership. This student success report is scarcely the last word on the subject—it is, in fact, the union's first word on the subject, and we expect many ideas presented here to be refined in conversations all over the country. The important thing is that those conversations about student success start taking place in many more places than they are today.

# The National Discussion

**H**ALF A CENTURY AGO, THE UNITED STATES UNDERTOOK A HISTORIC COMMITMENT TO make an affordable college education available to all Americans, regardless of their financial means. At the federal level, this commitment led to the establishment of a structure of student financial assistance that has grown more and more elaborate over the years. At the state level, the commitment to college access for all resulted in the opening and funding of thousands of public universities and community colleges. Hundreds of thousands of college students, most of whom would never have been able to attend college in another era, have taken successful advantage of these policies. The federal and state commitment to public higher education has been one of the clearest public policy successes in American history.

Today, more students than ever are attending community colleges and universities. There has been a recent upsurge in college enrollment spurred in part by the state of the economy from 2008 to 2010. At the same time, however, the ability of public higher education to accommodate growing enrollment has been handicapped in critical ways. College costs continue to rise. State and local governments have decreased their level of investment in public colleges and universities, and institutions have responded by cutting back the share of spending directed to instruction. Government disinvestment has resulted in higher tuitions which, in turn, have left students assuming unreasonable levels of debt to attend college and, worse, prevented many from enrolling altogether or persisting in their studies. Funding for federal student assistance, until just recently, failed to keep pace with rising costs, and the recent gains made to the federal Pell Grant program are always in danger of being rolled back. Students from racial and ethnic minorities and other first-generation college students have suffered most from these inadequacies.

With enrollments on the rise and without a comparable public investment in higher education, the capacity of public colleges and universities to serve students is now

strained beyond the limit. Unfortunately, it is becoming commonplace to see academic programs curtailed or eliminated and corners being cut on student services in an attempt to maintain a “bare bones” budget. To meet the influx of students, instructional staffing is being built increasingly on a part-time and full-time corps of “contingent” faculty members without permanent jobs and without basic economic and professional supports. America is no longer the world leader in college attainment. Student retention rates are far lower than educators want or the nation should accept.

At the same time, one fact is still incontrovertible: Most people who complete a postsecondary degree or certificate program<sup>1</sup> do better in every aspect of their lives. In March 2004, the national average total personal income of workers 25 and older with a bachelor’s degree was \$48,417, roughly \$23,000 higher than for those with a high school diploma. For those with an associate’s degree, the average total personal income of workers 25 and older was \$32,470, still \$7,400 more than those with a high school

1. See, for instance, *The Investment Payoff: A 50-State Analysis of the Public and Private Benefits of Higher Education* (2005) by the Institute for Higher Education Policy.



diploma.<sup>2</sup> Providing greater opportunities for students from all walks of life to succeed in college needs to be a top issue on the national agenda.

Recognizing the growing importance of a college education, it is not surprising that public discussion and debate about student success issues is at an all-time high. This has been driven in part by the strong priority placed on higher education by the Obama administration. Overall, the emphasis on student success is a positive development. Our members fully agree that student retention is not as high as it should be, and they are eager to play a leading role in improving conditions.

However, with growing alarm, many of us have been following today's policy debates about student success issues such as curriculum, assessment and accountability. Unfortunately, some of the fevered discussion on this subject has not been as constructive as it could be, nor as grounded in the experiences of frontline educators as it should be. When it comes to generating solutions to the problems facing students and colleges, we have seen too heavy an emphasis on solutions that are overly simplistic and fail to address the reality on campus.

Too often, AFT members see proposals put forward to measure things because they are measurable, not because they really tell us anything new or important about the educational program. For example, our members often witness the imposition of "pay-for-performance" formulas that define institutional success primarily in terms of a high graduation rate. This is problematic for a number of reasons: first, because the graduation formula is notoriously flawed (see inset) and also because pay-for-performance programs can create perverse incentives for institutions either to lower their educational standards (to achieve a higher graduation or job placement rate) or, conversely, to raise their entrance requirements so they can "cherry pick" students who are likely to give them high graduation numbers.

There are further issues. One is the proliferation of accountability proposals designed around the perspective that higher education can be seen and assessed through the same lens as elementary and secondary education. In fact, the two levels of education are fundamentally different. Elementary and secondary education is mandatory and aimed primarily at producing a somewhat uniform set of education outcomes grade by grade. Higher education, on the other hand, is pursued and paid for by adults who choose

2. Ibid.

## FEDERAL GRADUATION RATE FORMULA

**T**HE MOST GLARING EXAMPLE OF THE DISTANCE between policy and reality is the current federal graduation-rate formula, which serves as the basis of a great deal of higher education policymaking. The problem is that the federal graduation formula fails to account for more than half of today's undergraduates and therefore presents a skewed picture of what is going on in the classroom, particularly at institutions serving large numbers of nontraditional students. No attainment formula could capture all the nuances of student attainment, but the federal graduation-rate formula would be much more accurate if it tracked students for a longer period of time and if it tracked part-time students, students who transfer from one college to another, students who do not finish their degrees within 150 percent of the "normal" time, and the many students who are seeking neither a degree nor a certificate but who attend classes to pick up job skills or for personal enrichment.

institutions and programs to meet their own very diverse education and career goals. This diversity is a great strength of American colleges and universities, and therefore our members are concerned that overstandardizing assessment would weaken rather than strengthen education.

In the same vein, a great deal of discussion about accountability seems to focus on producing exactly comparable data among all disciplines and all institutions. This perspective, in turn, has led to the generation of a number of standardized student assessments despite very mixed expert opinion of their reliability and value.<sup>3</sup> Too often, AFT members report that they are facing the imposition of standardized tests, which they believe to be divorced from the institution's learning program and insensitive to the variety of education objectives in different disciplines. For example, tests such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment may offer some valuable information pertaining to a particular sample of students in a specific time or place. However, questions have been raised about whether the CLA is a reliable assessment of the growth in student learning from one year to the next—our members are concerned about whether it is appropriate to draw sweeping conclusions

3. See Trudy Banta's "A Warning on Measuring Learning Outcomes" (2007): [www.insidehighered.com/views/2007/01/26/banta](http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2007/01/26/banta)

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from student samples and employ those conclusions to evaluate institution-wide student learning and teacher performance.

The AFT believes that a lot of what goes wrong with so many curriculum, teaching and assessment proposals is caused by the fact that classroom educators—along with their knowledge of pedagogy and experience with students—are not often at the center of the program development process. **The perspective of frontline educators should assume a much more prominent role in public discussion about student success and about the most appropriate forms of accountability for assessing it.**

Frontline faculty and staff can contribute greatly to the development of policies that expand student access and success while preserving the fundamental aspects of a successful college experience—a diverse offering of degree and certificate programs in which students can learn in ways that best suit them, one in which assessment and accountability mechanisms support student learning as the rich and complex experience we in the classroom know it to be. We do not want to be left with a major investment of resources that produces nothing more than a complicated, time-consuming maze of data that tells us little or nothing of importance about student learning but reorients college curricula to a lowest-common-denominator, teach-to-the-test curriculum.

Finally, it seems clear that policymakers, policy analysts and frontline educators are often talking past one another on issues of student success and accountability or, more frequently, not really talking at all. We need to break down these walls to search for the best solutions to the challenges facing our students. Educators and all the other higher education stakeholders need to talk more frequently and candidly about these issues with open minds and a willingness to consider different perspectives.

# The Elements Of Student Success

EVERYONE AGREES THAT THE HIGHER EDUCATION CURRICULUM, TEACHING, ASSESSMENT and accountability all need to be focused squarely on student success. At the same time, everyone does not agree on what student success actually means. Some analysts emphasize the achievement of a baccalaureate degree; others are engaged in a national drive to expand the number of community and technical college degrees. Still others emphasize the need to increase opportunities to attain formal training certifications.

AFT members, however, usually think of student success somewhat more broadly—defining student success as the achievement of the student’s own education goals. Our members teach not only students who may be on track to obtain degrees or certificates, but they also teach students who are looking primarily for job training without earning a formal credential or to acquire professional skills to enhance their career opportunities. Other students are studying academic subjects strictly for learning’s sake. Adding to the complexity, students often adjust their goals throughout their college years.

That is why we believe that measuring student success solely in terms of degree attainment reflects a misunderstanding of today’s academy. To understand the realities of student success, the AFT believes we must begin to identify ways to assess student academic goals throughout the educational pathway and—specifically called for by the students who participated in our focus groups—ensure that students have multiple opportunities to assess and reassess their goals through a rich process of advisement or counseling. In short, we believe agreement needs to be reached among stakeholders on what student success encompasses and how information on student success can be acquired.

The next question, then, is how to continually strengthen the learning experience for students. Are there particular frameworks or ways of doing things that best promote success, given that the one constant in higher education is diversity, not uniformity? Over the last year, AFT Higher

Education leaders worked to uncover common elements of student success, cutting across different programs and disciplines, that can be viewed as a framework for the type of educational experience all students should have in some form. In doing so, we found that although there are many different curriculum rubrics going around education circles, there is actually a great deal of consensus about the elements of good learning. Those elements, we believe, include (1) exposure to **knowledge** in a variety of areas, (2) the development of **intellectual abilities** necessary for gathering information and processing it, and (3) **applied professional and technical skills**. The chart on the next page elaborates on this.

These elements, it should be noted, emphasize the importance of connecting theoretical and practical learning. The balance of academic material and the learning context obviously will differ substantially in different education settings, particularly between strictly academic and career-oriented programs. For example, a student studying computer-assisted design at a community college with the goal of attaining a one-year certificate will experience a different mix and depth of the elements than a student studying anthropology at a research university with the goal of attaining a master’s degree. Even in the most training-oriented coursework, however, good programs will work to incorporate broad perspectives into the curriculum because understanding them will enhance the professional and personal success of students in any walk of life.

## ELEMENTS OF STUDENT SUCCESS

KNOWLEDGE	INTELLECTUAL ABILITIES	PROFESSIONAL/TECHNICAL SKILLS
<p>All students should achieve an appropriate level of knowledge in a particular field of study and have a level of exposure to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Knowledge of the physical and natural world</li> <li>■ Intercultural knowledge and competence</li> <li>■ Civic knowledge and engagement</li> <li>■ Ethics reasoning</li> </ul>	<p>A broad set of intellectual abilities is crucial for all students, including the ability to integrate these skills and apply them in both academic and practical contexts. These abilities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Critical inquiry</li> <li>■ Creative thinking</li> <li>■ Problem solving</li> <li>■ Independent learning</li> <li>■ Data manipulation</li> <li>■ Analysis and assessment of information</li> <li>■ Synthesis</li> </ul>	<p>Students should gain the ability to apply the knowledge learned in a particular field of study and also have a broad set of skills that will serve them in both academic and professional settings. These skills include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Written communications</li> <li>■ Oral communications</li> <li>■ Quantitative literacy</li> <li>■ Information literacy</li> <li>■ Teamwork skills</li> </ul>

The elements of student success listed above offer one way (certainly not the only way) to focus professional thinking, collaboration and planning around the institution's teaching program and assessment. There are several other frameworks in play that address similar issues. The framework here is not posed in conflict or even in contradistinction to any other. The AFT hopes that our members and other stakeholders find this perspective helpful. The important thing, however, is not any particular rubric but to begin, continue or improve a deliberative and intentional process for achieving student success based on the evidence that students want and would benefit from a high degree of clarity and interconnection in their coursework.

### Implementation

Although there appears to be much consensus on the elements of student learning, our members are concerned that most plans follow either a multi-institutional or top-down model (or both) in implementing student learning plans, and this makes for frameworks that cannot be carried out effectively on the ground. Because institutional missions and student bodies are so diverse, and because

it is always important to capitalize on the mix of expertise at each institution, our members strongly believe that the process of program development should be conducted at the college or university level, although guidelines developed by disciplinary organizations or other scholars may certainly inform the process. Frontline faculty members should drive this process in order to ensure that educational practices are effective and practical in the classroom. The union believes effective implementation needs to be based on the following guidelines:

- 1.** Faculty should be responsible for leading any discussions about how the elements of student success are further articulated and refined to help students at their institution succeed.
- 2.** The implementation process should respect the principles of academic freedom.
- 3.** Discussions about implementation should begin within disciplines and programs and then expand to the wider institutional curriculum. This is essential because it makes much more sense to find commonalities at the disciplinary level and then work up toward the institutional level, rather than forcing a top-down fit.



- 4.** Professional staff should be involved in the process, particularly with regard to how the elements will be articulated vis-à-vis academic advising and career counseling.
- 5.** Discussions about implementing common elements for student success not only should respect differences among disciplines and programs, but also strive for an integrated educational experience for students.
- 6.** Faculty and staff work on these issues constantly, so any work that already has been done must be acknowledged rather than approaching implementation as reinventing the wheel.
- 7.** Discussions should include not only how to refine the elements to set appropriate goals for students in various programs and at the institution in general, but should also include curriculum design, teaching methods and assessments.
- 8.** Assessing the effectiveness of this process should focus on student success, academic programs and activities as well as on student services, and not be used to evaluate the performance of individual faculty or staff.

“Our members strongly believe that the process of program development should be conducted at the college or university level.”

# Roles and Responsibilities for Achieving Student Success

IT TAKES THE WORK OF MANY STAKEHOLDERS TO PRODUCE A SUCCESSFUL EDUCATIONAL experience. Each stakeholder has unique responsibilities as well as the shared responsibility to work collaboratively with one another. Below is a summary framework of the responsibilities of higher education institutions, faculty and staff members, government agencies and students themselves in producing a successful educational experience. These roles and responsibilities, in turn, can serve as the basis of evaluating the institution's success in meeting its goals.

## Institutions of Higher Education

The organizational structure for advancing and certifying higher learning in our society rests with public and private institutions of higher education. The leadership of these institutions is responsible for building and continually replenishing the structures and conditions that promote student success. Institutional leadership, then, is responsible (and therefore accountable) for:

- 1.** Securing adequate funding for the institution and once that funding is obtained, ensuring that it is targeted first and foremost to instruction and support services that help students advance toward their goals. At the same time, administrators should advocate to keep tuition down and take whatever actions are possible to ensure affordability, particularly by examining administrative costs.
- 2.** Developing a structure and level of instructional staffing that advances student success and creates a secure professional environment for good teaching and scholarship. As noted earlier, colleges and universities have greatly diminished the proportion of full-time tenured teaching positions in favor of developing an instructional workforce largely made up of contingent faculty employees, particularly part-time/adjunct faculty members, who are accorded very poor pay, very little

professional support, few or no benefits, little or no job security, and few or no academic freedom protections. The problem is that these instructors often are not expected to perform many of the most essential duties of faculty—and, in the absence of a union contract, almost always not paid for performing them—such as meeting with students to provide support and counsel and mentoring. This structure is detrimental to students, particularly at-risk students who need informed, consistent assistance in making their way to degrees and certificates.

We must recognize that an important part of the institutional responsibility for student success consists of collaborating with government and other stakeholders to expand full-time faculty opportunities and to ensure that *all* faculty members have living wages, job security, office space, benefits, professional development, and fair and transparent evaluation practices.

- 3.** Maintaining effective procedures to ensure that curriculum, teaching and assessment are faculty driven. Most particularly, institutions are responsible for ensuring that academic policy decisions are based on the principle of shared governance and that protections are in place to enhance academic freedom, including due process, job security and tenure or tenure-like protections. Given that contingent faculty are teaching most of the undergraduate courses in this country, access to shared governance

and protection of academic freedom must extend to all instructors.

**4.** Building support-service structures that advance student success. Strong student services such as advising and mentoring, professional development for faculty and staff, and technological support are critical elements in helping students succeed. Institutions should build structures that facilitate continual interchange between faculty and staff members in regard to sorting out responsibilities and following the progress of individual students.

**5.** Supporting and coordinating recurring institution-wide reviews of progress in carrying out the student success agenda. Student success should be an institutional priority. Institutions should commit to supporting annual (or more frequent) meetings at which faculty across departments can come together to share their best practices for improving student learning and ensuring student success. Frontline educators, obviously, should play the leading role in this process.

**6.** Maintaining and enforcing the standards of student responsibility listed below. Institutions should develop clear standards for holding students accountable for their own learning, and then communicate those standards in ways that are easy for students to understand and act on.

**7.** Ensuring public transparency on such matters as program and degree options, student attainment and course scheduling. Along these lines, institutions should not shrink from revealing information that uncovers problems, including budget and fiscal management problems, as well as information that might point the way to improvement.

**8.** Helping to improve pathways from preK-12 to college. College readiness is a significant factor in student success and sometimes falters because the two systems are administered separately. Institutions need to work with school districts; secure grant funds and other sources of aid to facilitate program development; and work with faculty and staff, through institutional procedures and collective bargaining contracts, to offer significant professional rewards for faculty and staff to undertake this work.

## Faculty and Staff Members

Faculty and staff members are responsible for:

**1.** Working individually and collaboratively with their colleagues, tenured and nontenured, full-time and

part-time, to develop challenging curricula that are academically strong and provide the tools students will need to be successful in their lives when they leave the institution.

■ As noted earlier, producing good educational results is strengthened when faculty members and staff have regular opportunities to think in a coordinated, “intentioned” way about their coursework. This includes the coursework’s relevance to the world students will face outside academia, about the best methods to incorporate such skills into their teaching and how to assess the degree to which these goals are achieved.

Regular opportunities should be taken to obtain the views of stakeholders such as students and business representatives, disciplinary associations, civic leaders and other community organizations about the efficacy of the educational program although, in the final analysis, education decisions should be driven by educators.

**2.** Being available and providing proactive help to students in puzzling out the requirements of the academic program and the course subject matter. Here again, an academic staffing structure that limits the contributions of part-time/adjunct and other contingent faculty members precludes opportunities for students that can be crucial to their success. Accessibility and availability of instructors is a critical factor in student success, especially in the first year or two of college and especially for underprepared college students. At the same time, students and administrators alike should understand that the availability of either full- or part-time faculty members needs to be encompassed in a manageable, flexible workload.

**3.** Advising students on their career goals and the consequences of the choices they make (e.g., the number and nature of courses taken, the number of hours devoted to study, the number of hours worked to help finance their education, etc.) on the students’ ability to meet their academic goals. This applies both to faculty members and to professional staff.

**4.** Offering early and continual feedback and formative and summative assessment of student progress. In particular, faculty should employ assessment tools that assess students’ understanding of course content and learning styles early in the term, and create incentives for students to engage with faculty early and often during the course.

5. Participating actively in institution-wide reviews of progress in carrying out a student success agenda.
6. Pressing the college administration to ensure that policy decisions are based on the principles of shared governance, academic freedom and due process. Again, access to shared governance and protection of academic freedom must extend to all instructors.
7. Supporting individual faculty members in attaining professional development, improving their pedagogy and technological skills, and strengthening other aspects of the faculty skill set.

## Students

To further their own success, students must be responsible, among other things, for:

1. Attending classes and keeping up with their coursework. Students must understand that the minimum time commitment required for success in their courses is generally two hours on top of every classroom hour.
2. Engaging professionals in discussions about students' coursework and their educational and career goals. It is imperative that students regularly seek out faculty, academic and career counselors outside of class. If students encounter difficulty gaining access to these professionals, they should make this known to the institution.
3. Periodically taking a hard look at their academic and career goals, the time commitments they undertake and the state of their finances to ensure that they develop a program of study that has a good prospect for success.

## Government

Government's primary responsibility is to provide the financial support institutions and students need to, respectively, provide and receive a high-quality education. As we noted earlier, government, particularly state government, has not been fulfilling this responsibility effectively in recent years.

1. Public institutions need to be provided sufficient public funding to support institutional operations (traditionally a state responsibility) and to ensure that college is affordable for their students (both a state and

federal responsibility). Instead, most states have pursued a policy of disinvestment in education and public services. This has left those of us in higher education facing impossible choices.

A real and lasting solution to the problems of college student retention and attainment will not be achieved without greater government support.

2. State governments need to make sure that colleges and universities are properly staffed to ensure student success. One of the most glaring failures of government policy over the last generation has been the failure to strengthen academic staffing so as to build the ranks of full-time tenure-track faculty or provide adequate financial and professional support to contingent faculty members. The AFT supports a comprehensive national campaign called the Faculty and College Excellence initiative (FACE) to address the staffing crisis through legislation, political action, collective bargaining, research and communications. (See our website at [aftface.org](http://aftface.org).)

3. Government needs to put structures in place ensuring that institutions provide a high-quality educational program for their students. Traditionally, government has wisely avoided direct intervention at the institutional level, relying instead on an extensive, decentralized system of self-regulation by private accrediting agencies to fulfill much of this responsibility. However, the growth in attention to accountability issues during the past decade has led to a great many proposals—some from people in government, some from institutional organizations, some from individual academics, think tanks and foundations, some from accrediting agencies—to impose more direct and measurable quality criteria for curriculum, teaching and assessment.

Government has an obligation to hold institutions accountable for achieving demonstrably good results—our members believe this very strongly. However, there are more promising ways and less promising ways to achieve quality. In our experience, practices that rely on criteria developed without the participation of frontline faculty usually fail in practice because they are not connected to the realities of the classroom or tailored to the differing missions and strengths of individual institutions.

4. The states and the federal government both need to ensure that students are not subject to fraud and abuse. This applies with particular force to profit-making colleges that often appear to be more committed to taking student tuition dollars than giving students a high-quality education.



**5.** Governments at the state and the federal levels should collect data that can be useful to institutions, students and their families on key factors such as cost, student financial assistance and college attainment. As noted earlier, the graduation rate formula used by the federal government is fatally flawed and should be abandoned or altered to reflect the realities of the educational progress of today's students. But even as the states and the federal government collect more information about the educational experience of individual students, there need to be controls on how information is collected and used to ensure student privacy and to prevent governments from being overly involved in academic decision-making and assessment.

**6.** Last but certainly not least, the federal government needs to maintain a healthy structure of student financial

assistance that keeps pace with college costs and makes college affordable for students who are not from affluent families. For many years, the purchasing power of financial aid programs was permitted to languish, which made a near mockery of the national commitment to educational access. One result, for many students, is the need to work excessively while in college to pay tuition, which studies have shown has a harmful effect on academic achievement. Students who fail to enter college or who prematurely leave college overwhelmingly cite financial and family pressures—not academic concerns—as the most important reason for abandoning their education. Advocates of specific solutions, however, are obligated to demonstrate that the ideas they are putting forward will make an important difference in correcting the conditions that cause retention problems in the first place.

# The College Retention Issue

**A**S WE NOTED BEFORE, MUCH OF TODAY'S PUBLIC DEBATE HAS FOCUSED ON IMPROVING college student retention. We have described many problems in the ways by which retention is tracked, but it is nevertheless true that college student retention is too low and is a source of great concern to AFT members. In the past, colleges and universities answered questions about retention by asserting that American higher education was the most expansive and highest quality in the world. That is still largely true. However, in recent years, concern about accountability has been fueled by newer data indicating that U.S. college attainment rates have fallen over time and in relation to other countries. In addition, there are ample data demonstrating totally unacceptable attainment disparities among students from different racial and ethnic groups and economic strata. Short of lowering academic standards, our members will do everything possible to address this national problem.

It makes no sense to implement a raft of curriculum and assessment mechanisms if they do not have a substantial impact on the problem you are trying to solve. In that vein, we have examined what we consider to be the most significant obstacles to college student success.

- Inadequate academic preparation (a problem perceived more strongly by faculty and staff than by students);
- Inadequate student finances and college affordability, particularly for adult and other nontraditional students;
- Personal obligations such as a new child or an ill relative;
- Uncertainty about academic requirements. Students report that they often feel somewhat at sea about what courses they should be taking, how those courses relate to their post-college goals and what they need to do to be successful in class;
- Inaccessibility and inconvenience in terms of geography, the scheduling of courses and the availability of on-

line options. At the same time, the community college students in our focus groups understood there is sometimes a trade-off between convenience, on the one hand, and high academic standards on the other—when trade-offs are necessary, the student focus groups overwhelmingly came down on the side of sticking with strong academic preparation.

- Difficulty in gaining access to faculty or staff who can clarify course requirements, help students overcome problems and advise on career paths.

Given these issues, it is not hard to envision the solutions.

- 1. *Strengthen preparation in preK-12 by increasing the public support provided to school systems and the professionals who work in them.*** As noted earlier, college faculty and staff at the postsecondary and preK-12 levels should be provided financial and professional support to coordinate standards between the two systems and minimize disjunctions.

**2. Strengthen federal and state student assistance so students can afford to enter college and remain with their studies despite other obligations.** Again, students report that paying for college is an overwhelming challenge and that they must work significant hours to support their academic career, often at the expense of fully benefiting from their classes. We cannot expect to keep balancing the books in higher education by charging students out-of-reach tuition and dismantling financial and professional support for a healthy system of academic staffing.

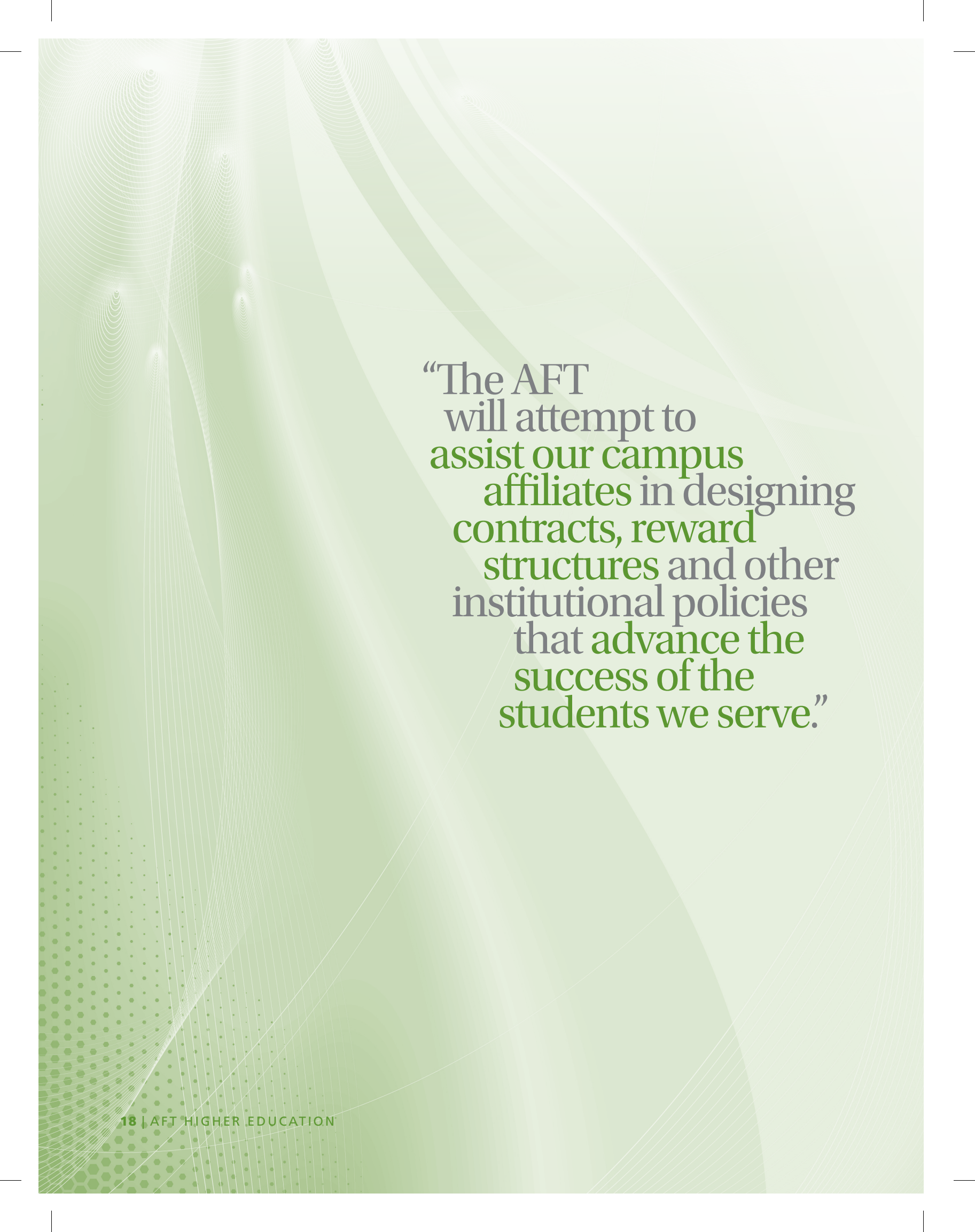
**3. Institute or expand student success criteria along the lines of the construct described earlier (or an equally valid one).** This is best based on deliberate, multidisciplinary planning at the institutional level. One of the aims is to provide the clarity students report they need to achieve their educational aspirations while providing greater transparency outside the academic community.

**4. Coordinate learning objectives with student assessment.** The desire to compare learning across different institutions on a single scale is understandable. However, we strongly believe that student learning would be diminished, not enhanced, by administering national assessments that overly homogenize “success” to what is easily measurable and comparable.

**5. Provide greater government funding and reassess current expenditure policies to increase support for instruction and staffing.** There must be an investment in a healthy staffing system rather than one built on the exploitation of contingent labor and the loss of full-time tenured faculty. The system of public higher education finance in the United States needs to be revamped so that colleges and universities have the capacity to fulfill the nation’s attainment goals.

**6. Improve the longitudinal tracking of students as they make their way through the education system and out into the world beyond.** The current federal graduation formula is much too narrow. We need to look at all students over a more substantial period of time, and we have to account for the great diversity in student goals to account properly for student success.

All of us involved in higher education need to keep our eye on the ball when it comes to student retention. The union and its members will join with other stakeholders to clarify learning criteria and connect them to effective assessment. At the same time, if we concentrate too much on developing ever more elaborate learning criteria without addressing the enormous financial and staffing issues that impede retention, we are likely to wind up with a lot of words and a lot of bureaucracy but very little concrete improvement for students.

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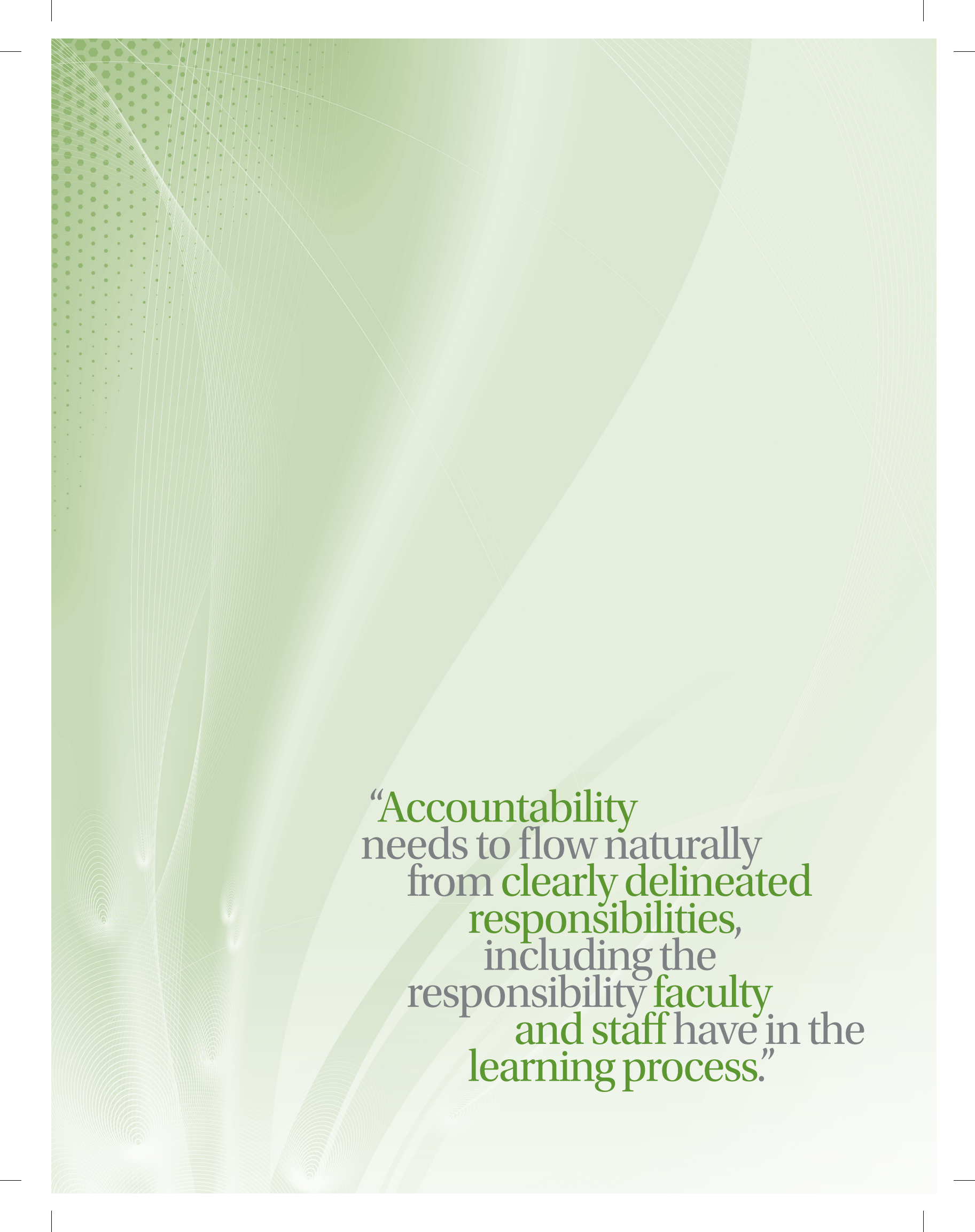
“The AFT  
will attempt to  
assist our campus  
affiliates in designing  
contracts, reward  
structures and other  
institutional policies  
that advance the  
success of the  
students we serve.”



# Conclusion

**W**E BELIEVE THAT TOO MANY OF TODAY'S policy discussions about higher education curriculum, teaching and assessment are not sufficiently connected to a clear set of understandings about what student success should look like or about what the appropriate roles and responsibilities of institutions, faculty and staff, students and government should be for achieving it. In this report, we have tried to offer a faculty and staff perspective that we hope will advance the national dialogue on these concerns. As this dialogue evolves, the AFT will welcome opportunities to continue engaging on these issues both inside and outside the union. The AFT will attempt to assist our campus affiliates in designing contracts, reward structures and other institutional policies that advance the success of the students we serve. We hope our members will be actively engaged in leading the discussion of student success issues at their institutions. Finally, we urge anyone reading this report to keep up periodically with AFT's What Should Count website at [www.whatshouldcount.org](http://www.whatshouldcount.org).



The background is a light green gradient with intricate white patterns. On the left side, there are vertical bands of small dots and thin, curved lines that create a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is clean, modern, and organic.

**“Accountability  
needs to flow naturally  
from clearly delineated  
responsibilities,  
including the  
responsibility faculty  
and staff have in the  
learning process.”**



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Item no. 36-11001