

# Creating Systematic Structures to Support Student Success in Higher Education

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## Abstract

This essay examines the importance of student success in higher education, particularly for underserved and disadvantaged student populations. This essay provides a review of contemporary trends in national postsecondary completion and strategies to enhance student success outcomes which will provide thriving economies and a talented workforce. Further, this work emphasizes the significance of approaching student success in a systematic way which engages campus leaders, state and federal policymakers, and workforce agencies.

*Keywords:* student success, retention, graduation, higher education policy, workforce, underserved students, disadvantaged students

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## Creating Systematic Structures to Support Student Success in Higher Education

Every student that decides to pursue a college education brings a distinct perspective and individual life experiences. As such, it is important that postsecondary institutions create environments that support students throughout their college career, which speak to their perspectives and individual realities. As students have their own realities outside of the expectations that colleges and universities have for them, the perspectives they bring to college directly correlate to their motivation as students and provide further insight on how and why they persist through college.

According to a recent report by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), *Raising College Student Success in the South*, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the decline in college enrollment and completion. Data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2022) further indicates that undergraduate enrollment decreased by approximately 9.4% in 2022. Just a decade earlier, there was an enrollment decline of 3 million students. Taking this into consideration, state legislators and other policy-makers must work to encourage more students to enroll in college and graduate on time, such that they can fill the workforce shortages in a variety of areas.

To further understand the disparities in college attainment from diverse student populations, the nation's African American and Hispanic populations grew faster than the White population during a ten-year period from 2010 to 2019. Although African Americans and Hispanics outpaced Whites in population growth during this period, White students continue to earn a bachelor's degree or higher at a greater rate nationally. In addition, it should be noted that since 2019, the total enrollment of college students declined for the ninth consecutive year, with enrollment decreasing by more than 620,000 students from 2014 to 2019. These type of decreases in college enrollment inhibit states from reaching their higher education attainment goals. This data has significant correlation to the strategy development for increasing student success outcomes from a state-by-state and national perspective. The workforce presently requires more educated talent, which supports the data shared by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2022).

The purpose of this essay is to highlight the importance of creating systematic structures for student success in higher education. This work focuses on highlighting the stakeholders who are necessary to implement sustainable student success frameworks from various levels and how creating these intentional collaborative frameworks impact student success outcomes at the campus, state, regional, and national levels. Furthermore, this essay reviews definitions of student success, examines issues that impact the success of students in higher education, and highlights a series of promising practices that can be used to increase student success outcomes.

## Defining Student Success

The transition from high school to postsecondary education can be challenging for students. There are a number of variables that have been found to be indicators of student achievement (Wilson et al., 2019). The success of students is critical to institutional performance. As such, identifying early on which students are at risk, and creating preventive solutions, can significantly increase postsecondary student success outcomes (Alyahyan & Dustegor, 2020).

There are many definitions of student success in higher education, and success relative to education at this level is defined from varying contexts. The SREB defines student success as increased college access and completion rates for postsecondary credentials that lead to a living wage for all adults. Student success can also be described as a longitudinal process, which starts with how prepared students are to tackle the challenges of earning a postsecondary credential when they graduate from high school. Continuing in this process are aspects of college choice and enrollment, followed by the level of achievement students exhibit in college, and culminating in successful postgraduate and career experiences (Perna & Thomas, 2006).

## What the Literature Says About Student Success

There are broad definitions and conceptualizations of student success and measures of achievement in higher education extend far beyond specific areas of study. Success for students in college is often connected to the creation of productive mindsets, the ability to manage a myriad of issues and challenges during matriculation, and the way students relate to other students and identifiers within their chosen profession (Lane et al., 2019). Kuh et al. (2006) have defined student success as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance.

For most within higher education, however, the key indicators for student success are related to student retention, educational attainment, academic achievement, and student advancement. Student retention directly correlates with students entering college and remaining throughout the lifecycle of a prescribed amount of time, related to the time to degree completion suggested for a specific course of study.

The student experience is a key component of postsecondary student success. The student experience includes two critical components: how students behave and the conditions of the institution. Student behaviors include the amount of time and interest a student commits to their studies, how well and how much they interact with faculty and other supporting staff, as well as how well and how often they interact with their peers within the college setting. Coupled with this are the conditions of the institution. This component is becoming more important to students today. Institutional

conditions include how many and what type of resources are available to students, the policies in place which support the overall success of students, as well as the programs, practices, and other features that support the holistic development of students while they are in college. Students must feel as though they belong in the place where they have chosen to pursue their postsecondary education.

Carney and Banning (2001) explain this as a full conceptualization of place as described in their book, *Designing for Learning: Creating Campus Environments for Student Success*. The concept of place, as emphasized in this text, refers to what students actually experience, which further contributes to their ability to understand the dynamics of the college campus and how each of these dynamics contribute to their experience and overall success. Embedded in the concept of place and its connectivity to the success of students are questions that campus leaders should ask that will assist with creating campus environments that support the holistic development and success of students. These questions include whether the campus is attractive, whether students feel a sense of belonging, whether the campus provides a personal meaning for its students, and whether student expectations are being met relative to the environment and what the campus offers.

## Factors That Influence Student Success

According to De Silva et al. (2022), there are three main factors that influence whether students are successful in their postsecondary pursuits. De Silva and colleagues point out that institutional experiences, educational goals, and personal aspects related to motivation all contribute to the success of students in college at any level. To further support this, Barefoot (2004) emphasizes the importance of institutional focus on internal work practices and policies as well as how faculty and staff provide advice and counsel and create courses and curriculums that support and serve students based on their needs. To accomplish this, colleges and universities should acquire the necessary student data to serve students based on their needs. In relation to student motivation, resiliency and academic self-efficacy are positive predictors of the grades students earn while in college (Brady-Amoon & Fuertes, 2011). Optimism is another student motivation factor that is associated with college student success. Both academic and general optimism are correlated with how well students adjust to college and how well they are retained after initial enrollment (Solberg Nes et al., 2009).

Aside from the factors illustrated by De Silva et al. (2022) and others, students' socioeconomic status contributes to their ability to be successful while in college. In the 2019 article *Supporting Students Living in Poverty* by Tyler Sloan, poverty is determined to be the greatest factor in predicting students' postsecondary success. Socioeconomic status has several implications related to success in postsecondary education, including students' ability to access the proper technology to support contemporary trends in online teaching and learning, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted this issue across all sectors of higher education. Students who live at or below the

poverty line must grapple with acquiring the proper support in low-achieving school districts that do not necessarily have a well-qualified teaching workforce; this can contribute to lower levels of literacy than their peers who have a competitive advantage in primary and secondary learning opportunities starting college-level coursework.

## **Creating Systems to Support Students in College**

To ensure the success of all students at the postsecondary level, it is imperative that colleges and universities, as well as policymakers who are responsible for designing and supporting statewide and national models for student success, pay close attention to creating support systems and processes that enhance opportunities for a wide range of student demographic groups. Increased focus should be placed on services that target special student populations such as first-generation, minority groups, transfer, adult learners, and students with disabilities to fully move the needle on student success outcomes from a state, regional, and national perspective. These types of services include state funding to support programs that work to acclimate students to the college environment, such as summer bridge. Summer bridge programs allow students to earn college credits during the summer before their freshman year and have been shown to increase success outcomes for first-generation students. Other examples include special funding or incentive scholarships for minorities who are committed to earning postsecondary credentials to fill critical in-demand careers such as teaching, nursing, and those in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics areas. Creating seamless enrollment pathways between two- and four-year colleges is another important component that increases the success of transfer and adult learners, while providing increased capacity to support students with disabilities and minority students at all levels of postsecondary education.

First-generation college students are more likely to drop out of college, and when they persist, their time to degree or credential completion is longer than students who are not the first in their families to attend college (Davis, 2012). It is understood that the entire institution is responsible for the successful retention and graduation of its students. However, there are those who assume much of the perceived responsibility for supporting student needs is solely on those who work directly with students on a day-to-day basis. Student affairs departments and divisions are under increasing pressure to create student experiences that support an increasingly diverse student body (Murphy, 2021). Although student affairs professionals bare a great deal of responsibility for supporting students, such that colleges and universities experience greater student success outcomes, institutions must approach student success from a collaborative approach, which engages every division throughout the institution.

Colleges and universities are complex systems, often executing practices in daily operations that are not always student focused. Working together to support the success of students is key in institutions experiencing stronger and more consistent retention and

graduation rates. Colleges and universities must be intentional about working together to support student success. One of the first strategies to ensure that students are successfully retained is creating a collaborative approach to academic advising, which is a key process for enhancing student success outcomes.

## Moving the Needle on Student Success: Past, Present, and Future Considerations

Colleges and universities, regardless of the sector, are shifting their focus to ensure that student success is at the core of everything that they do. This is not a new reality within the larger ethos of postsecondary education; however, today, more institutions are beginning to view student success from a holistic approach. This is evidenced by institutions creating special departments and divisions led by executive leaders, such as a dean or vice president, who create strategy in student retention, persistence, and graduation. This approach ensures the proper engagement of each sector within the campus enterprise, calling for chief financial officers, academic and student affairs vice presidents, along with deans, department chairs, faculty, and other staff to work collaboratively to ensure that every decision is made using a student focused lens.

Increasingly, institutions of higher education are under pressure to ensure that they graduate students that can meet the demands of the workforce, such that economies will continue to grow and thrive. Every state has a goal for its higher education attainment, which is typically based on projected growth in employment opportunities for people with some postsecondary education or greater. According to data from the Education Commission of the States, the demand for workers who are highly educated and possess the requisite skillset to fill workforce demands in a wide range of areas significantly surpasses the current supply of workers who possess a postsecondary credential (Fulton, 2020). To increase postsecondary attainment, states must work to combat the greatest barrier to access and success beyond enrollment, which is affordability. According to a recent report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2022), the six-year college completion rate in 2022 was 62.2%. Similarly, *Inside Higher Education* reported that two-year institutions have the highest percentage of students who started college but did not persist forward to graduation within a six-year period, at 45.2% (Carrasco, 2022).

From a broader context, in order to see greater gains in postsecondary student success outcomes, federal, state, and institutional policies must work in concert to make college affordable for students from low-income backgrounds (Feldman, 2017). These stakeholders must also work as a system to ensure that policies created in one particular area connect to those of another and keep students and their families at the core of the policy and decision-making process.

To fully understand student success, postsecondary education leaders must realize their role in growing the number of students that enroll and complete a credential of

value. To help create systems that increase the number of highly skilled workers, it is recommended that more adults from the African American, Hispanic, Latino, and Native American population have greater access to programs that result in postsecondary credentials.

It is important that relevant stakeholders look at higher education as a system. This system connects to other entities such as regional and national workforces and economies. As colleges and universities successfully position themselves as engines that drive the human capital to fill industry and workforce needs, helping to build better and stronger economies, they can generate additional support from policymakers as they strive to increase the performance and successful graduation of students who are well prepared to fill targeted workforce gaps.

More than ever, a postsecondary credential is the gateway for increasing one's access to a high-paying employment opportunity. Postsecondary institutions must work to further strengthen their position within the system by marketing what they do in regard to providing students with degrees, but to a wider audience, positioning themselves as drivers of a knowledge economy, urging other players within the system to support structures and policies that encourage and support the success of students. It should be noted that going to college was not originally designed to provide students with career opportunities that yielded high wages or provide them with skills to fill critical workforce and industry needs (Lawrence, 2021).

In the article *What is The Purpose of College* by Alex Valaitis (2019), their original rationale for creating a higher education system in the United States is explained. Valaitis indicates that the first colleges and universities were created to train ministers, although there were students who attended college that were not interested in pursuing a religious career. For those students, attending college served to signify prestige. It was not until Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia in 1825 and lobbied for higher education institutions to start transitioning away from solely training ministers and start creating curriculum that were more desirable to the general population.

In addition to the ideals that Jefferson inferred to increase access to higher education, the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 provided states with land from the federal government to create public institutions that promoted learning in areas such as agriculture, engineering, and the mechanical arts. This federal legislation has been cited as the genesis of “democracy’s colleges” because it shifted higher education’s purpose in a profound way, positioning it to serve as affordable, practical education offered by state colleges and universities (Thelin, 2004). These skills were highly sought after during this period in American history and this strategy was one way in which to build a qualified workforce to meet these needs, just as postsecondary institutions do today.

In an ever-advancing higher education system, the concepts of access, equity, and inclusion have come to the forefront in how colleges and universities increase their enrollments and ensure that every student is provided an equal playing field to be successful. When the Morrill Act of 1862 was created, it did not provide complete access to higher education

for the entire American citizenry, as African Americans were still enslaved in this country and considerations were not given to provide access to higher education to citizens in the South as had been done in other regions of the country. As a result, the Second Morrill Act of 1891 extended federal funds to create colleges for African Americans in the South and other state-supported colleges that were not included in the first round of federal funding in 1862. The federal government's commitment to financially support Black-land grant colleges illustrated that the limits were beginning to be removed from higher education and greater access was being granted to those that needed professional education training (Thelin, 2004). Over a century and a half later, although tremendous gains have been made in higher education access, there is still a need for increased state and federal support for higher education, especially when using an access and equity lens for the most marginalized and disadvantaged communities.

As colleges, universities, and state and federal policymakers strategize to enhance the number of students that enroll in postsecondary education and successfully complete credentials, it is important for them to know that the pathway to success varies from racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and other groups, which are all based on the perspectives, experiences, and challenges that students bring to the college experience (Perna & Thomas, 2006). The unemployment rate across the United States continues to be at an all-time low; however, disparities in employment still exist when taking into consideration the level of degree attainment. For example, the unemployment rate for those with less than a high school diploma is 11.7%, three percentage points higher than those with a diploma and steadily decreases thereafter as education attainment increases.

This data links to the average earning differences based on levels of education attainment. Data from the Georgetown Center on Education and Workforce indicates that the average working adult will earn between \$1.2 million and \$41.7 million over a lifespan, depending on education level. Additionally, data provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020) suggests that the typical American will spend close to \$3 million over the course of a lifetime on housing, food, transportation, medical care, entertainment, and other miscellaneous expenses.

As higher education continues to change, it will be important to determine which factors contribute to student success and retention, especially as colleges and universities are now educating Generation Z students. Policies and practices that adapt to this changing higher education landscape will work to better serve historically under-represented student populations, which will improve postsecondary student success outcomes (Southern Regional Education Board, 2022).

## **How Stakeholders Can Promote Student Success**

To successfully move the needle on student success outcomes in higher education, colleges and universities must create spaces where they can share dialogue and processes



that lead to more accelerated and innovative learning options for students. In addition, institutions might consider assisting faculty to embed career or job-related education and preparation into all disciplines and curricula while increasing institutional engagement with employers; allowing faculty the opportunity to serve on internal advisory boards and participate in curriculum review processes and teaching and learning opportunities; and assisting with designing internship experiences for students (Southern Regional Education Board, 2022).

From a policymaking perspective, state policy influencers can provide families and students with greater access to higher education and subsequently improve both students' livelihoods and their overall well-being. Further, both policymakers and practitioners should take a closer look at the policies and practices they create to ensure that they are designed using a layered approach, which provides greater impact and enhances opportunities for success for a broad subset of the student population, rather than assuming that one or a collection of a few policies or strategies will work to decrease the widening gap between those who obtain a postsecondary credential and those that do not (Perna & Thomas, 2006).

Decreasing levels of higher education attainment will result in a reduction of future generations entering or remaining in the middle class. Consequently, declines in college enrollment and completion will contribute to increased poverty levels, less access to sufficient healthcare, greater reliance on social programs, and a dwindling tax base. Given the changing higher education landscape, it is paramount that focused efforts are designed to promote student success among not only colleges and universities, but among those who have influence in financing and supporting policies created to enhance student performance at the postsecondary level (Southern Regional Education Board, 2022). For colleges and universities to realize greater student success outcomes, contributing to national attainment goals, the rising cost of college is an issue that must be given immediate attention. Attention must also be given to creating institutional structures that enhance student success services, while successfully preparing students for the workforce.

As affordability continues to be a key issue for increasing student success outcomes, it is important to consider the issues that underserved and disadvantaged students face as they attempt to complete their postsecondary education. Students from low-income backgrounds are likely to experience increased financial strain, which can directly affect their ability to achieve their goals because they are focused on their financial circumstances rather than their educational goals.

## **Promoting Student Success in SREB States**

SREB serves 16 states throughout the Southern region. Included are the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland,

Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Historically, these states have been some of the most impoverished in the country. To help improve their outcomes in education and contribute to a continuously thriving economy, SREB was founded 75 years ago to improve public education at every level, assisting policymakers, schools, colleges, and universities bring resources together to improve the economic vitality of the region. To successfully accomplish this, it is principal for these states to develop strategies to increase access, success, and completion of postsecondary education credentials within each state mentioned, thereby providing more skilled workers to fill critical workforce needs, which helps build a robust economy for the South.

SREB's report, *Raising College Student Success in the South*, recommends that states within the region and postsecondary institutions make obtaining a college credential affordable for low- and middle-income families; help all students navigate, persist, and graduate; and create strategies that help all graduates secure jobs in their desired career fields. It is also recommended that each state within the SREB region tackle college affordability, implement comprehensive student success coaching models, and focus on graduating students who are fully prepared to meet critical workforce needs throughout the region and nationally. Furthermore, it is suggested that states provide more need-based aid and scholarships to low- and middle-income students as a key strategy to decrease the cost burden of college, thus contributing to their success. It is essential that institutions are transparent with students and families about the actual cost of attending college, while successfully articulating the value of obtaining a college degree. Successfully articulating the value of a college degree is important in today's environment as confidence in the value of postsecondary education is eroding.

How well student success services are organized influences their accessibility and impact on students, particularly among students that need the services the most. Centralizing student success services in a concierge type office, staffed with trained student success coaches, is highly recommended and fits into the environment of any type of college or university setting. Increasingly, the success of students is measured by their ability to find employment opportunities after graduation that align with the areas where they have earned credentials. As future employment is a key indicator of student success, the system of influencers in higher education must continue to create the appropriate career pathways, with support as students transition to college in their careers. Additionally, state and college leaders should understand the importance of postsecondary education to better align academic programs and successfully express how these academic programs support the mission of their institution, the needs of their students, and contribute to the workforce and growing the economy.

With the heightened awareness and focus on what it takes for students to be successful in college, data-informed decision-making is extremely important to institutions and leaders who create policy to support higher education. Using data analytics in find solutions to better support students in postsecondary education and designing the

proper interventions helps to drive institutional and then far-reaching change at the state and national level, which produce tangible results (Baer & Norris, 2016).

All students need help transitioning to college, regardless of their age, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, or background. Some students simply need more help making this transition than others and need more support as they matriculate through the college going process. Colleges, universities, and policymakers must be committed to providing students with options and resources that make attending college accessible and affordable.

## **Conclusion**

To realize greater student success outcomes, colleges, universities, policymakers, workforce agencies, and others must begin to work together to create strong systemic structures, which enhance the number of students that complete a postsecondary credential of value. These entities must be willing and committed to working together to find effective solutions to workforce shortages nationally. It is essential that postsecondary institutions, regardless of type, identify with their capacity to serve as engines for workforce and economic solutions, as they provide the skilled human resources to supply the workforce and continue to advance America's economy.

A commitment to student success and understanding the unique roles that policymakers, college and university administrators, and faculty and staff play in this area is critical to advancing educational attainment in America. Over the years, there has been less focus on how various stakeholders can work together to promote postsecondary credential completion, but in recent years, more states are realizing the importance of developing a systematic approach to increasing student success outcomes, realizing that it is not the singular mission of a college or university. The recommendations provided can serve as a guide to affect the change required to promote student success across a continuum.

Without consistent focused efforts on student success, postsecondary institutions and workforce agencies will not reach their goals. The key is to create more opportunities for underserved, traditionally marginalized, and disadvantaged student populations to gain access to higher education, while being provided with the proper resources to be successful while pursuing their goals. It requires invested interests and financial resources from a variety of sources in order to realize America's vision for a more skilled and educated workforce, which will be able to meet the many challenges of a growing and diverse economy.

## **Author Note**

This essay was written while the author was Vice President of Postsecondary Education at Southern Regional Education Board (SREB).

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