Are Colleges Listening to Students?

MICHAEL C. POINDEXter

Given the rising cost of a college education, inquisitive students and parents are asking more questions than ever before about student satisfaction and success on our campuses.

To answer these questions, most institutions are speaking a new language. *Student engagement, outcomes, assessment and culture of evidence* have become familiar terms as administrators, faculty and staff become invested in how to better recruit, retain and graduate students in preparation for their roles as respectable members of the workforce and society. With each increasingly diverse freshman class, campuses must revisit these issues of assessment, outcomes, student engagement and data, so they can better understand the entire process of student life, from recruitment to graduation.

Factoring in students. In the 21st century, collecting, analyzing and utilizing data underlies how learning institutions mold themselves. Simply stated, institutions of higher education *must* factor the needs of the students into the equation. Collecting information about students is certainly not new. But this process has not always been the driving force for colleges to change, nor has it been the basis for supporting or implementing new initiatives at most institutions. In fact, institutions often moved toward change solely on the recommendation of an individual or group who promoted an idea without clear evidence to support it.

Now, with resources scarce, no blank checks are being written. Today, colleges place priority on those projects supported by data, where the benefits are easily noted.

Data also help colleges answer questions about themselves such as: Who are we? Who do we want to be? How well do we want to do what we do? What do we want to be known for? What do we want students to leave with? And how will we know we are on the right track? Using data carefully to address these questions, colleges can better prioritize their goals and develop evidence to form strategies for student success.

Taking a snapshot. Four-year institutions generally use ACT or SAT scores to get a snapshot of a student's academic preparation and progress. It is well-known, however, that many variables, including family income, parents' educational background, home library or access to a computer, books and a host of other factors, affect how well students perform on these tests. Consequently, many colleges, particularly community colleges, administer their own assessment to all incoming students. This assessment, usually Compass or Accuplacer, is used to appropriately place students in English, writing, mathematics, and critical thinking courses which directly relate to the assessment score.

These courses may be developmental, or "remedial," because more and more students enter college with one or more deficiencies. These students must upgrade their academic aptitude by taking developmental courses before they can be expected to succeed in their declared major. Though some students may object to taking courses that do not apply to their major and may delay graduating, the effectiveness of these developmental courses is well-established. The Community College of Denver found students who had taken these courses were more likely to graduate with an associate or bachelor's degree than their counterparts who did not follow the advice provided by assessment and advising offices to take the courses. Requiring developmental or prerequisite courses, labs and tutorial programs and enforcing special provisional admit programs based on deficiencies and assessment scores is not unusual for colleges or even prestigious universities, especially if they are committed to helping students to succeed.

Colleges should also survey their students about their levels of satisfaction and expectation to determine if they, the institutions, are on the right track. Many have begun to depend on the Community College Survey of Student Engagement and the National Survey of Student Engagement for this information, as they have become more aware of the important role student input can play in whether students leave or stay on their campuses. These surveys give insights into the relationship between effective practices and selected aspects of student success. Says Kay McClenney, director of the community college survey, "Colleges are using the survey data to ask the hard questions about their practices and the student outcomes that result from them." It is clear that, if a college wishes to be successful, administrators, faculty and staff must listen to the voices of their students and all stakeholders and incorporate what they hear into their priorities.

What's learned? The colleges in the forefront of ensuring student success are taking on the enormous task of developing a clear picture of what a student can expect to learn in each and every class that the college offers. These expected outcomes provide a common thread that may be woven through every section of a course. Some colleges may also have common threaded outcomes imbedded in all courses. This is often referred to as Critical Skills Across the Curriculum.

These skills may be related to writing, critical thinking, reading, technology, diversity or mathematical reasoning. While outcomes are usually seen in academic courses, outcomes are increasingly developed in almost every area of college operations, because everyone is responsible for student preparedness and success.

Student engagement. One thing college administrators know about students is that they are more likely to stay in college through to graduation if they have a sense of belonging or "connectiveness" to a college community. But most students arrive on campus ill-equipped to begin making connections. For many, the new surroundings are frightening, intimidating and unfamiliar territory with new rules, policies and expectations. Most students will need optional ways to engage, participate in and navigate through their new environment.

All aspects of college life can be channeled to address student engagement. In the classroom, for example, faculty are being challenged to provide options for learning, such as combining two courses to create new learning communities, providing an environment that is different from the traditional room and time schedule, using technology or even using the students as facilitators for the class. These approaches all engage students in new ways. Some faculty are creating virtual classrooms through chat rooms where students interact with each other about course content and materials. Other initiatives are taking place outside the classroom through service learning experiences where student combine practice with theory through volunteer or in-service opportunities that provide them with very specific skills, such as leadership, networking/diversity, organizations, civic responsibility and voluntarism. Freshman-year experience programs and courses aimed at familiarizing and connecting students to learning strategies that help them be more academically successful have also been instrumental in combining in-class and out-of-class experiences.

Data, assessment, outcomes and student engagement have become more than buzzwords. Colleges that do not effectively use data, engage students and listen to their voices risk failure in meeting student satisfaction and expectations (as well as accreditation, membership in various associations and grant opportunities). These are only a few words of the new language that forward-looking colleges speak as they redefine themselves to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The vocabulary is expanding as learning institutions travel a path that clearly has no end.

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Short Shrift for Staffing Student Support

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Staffing patterns at colleges and universities offer a glimpse of institutional priorities. St. Vincent's College in Bridgeport, Conn., recently studied two dozen peer institutions in New England, most with specialized missions, to see how these colleges staff various support services other than academics.

What we found, in short, is that those areas that bear a direct relationship to the generation of revenue enjoy robust staffing. In contrast, support services that are not deemed critical to a college's financial health are thinly staffed.

The average institution served 369 students with a wide variation in terms of staff assigned to various offices. Business offices and admissions offices were better staffed than other areas with 3.25 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff and 2.96 FTE, respectively.

Student life and counseling came in last with just 0.92 FTE and 0.55 FTE, respectively. Smaller colleges with smaller budgets frequently rely upon faculty rather than counselors to deliver academic counseling.

Clearly, institutions place a greater emphasis on administrative departments charged with collecting student fees, tuition and other revenues.

Colleges also need to keep the flow of students coming in order to have "customers." This puts the admissions office close behind the business office as a staffing priority. Financial aid comes next with 1.38 FTE, as it is crucial that students are able to pay the bills sent to them by the business office. The registrar (1.11 FTE) is needed to keep track of the students, and data from that office are needed for regulatory and accrediting agencies.

Libraries were reasonably well staffed at 2.19 FTE staff, because they are one of the places that accrediting bodies look in making judgments about an institution's academic viability.

Computer support averaged 1.5 FTE staff, but varied considerably among institutions. Some chose to "outsource" this activity.

Despite their claim of developing the student "holistically," many colleges fall short in staffing areas such as counseling and student activities that are closely related to developing the student as a "whole person."

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