

studentsuccess

FEATURE

Institutional Strategies. A New Three-Part Series

Over the course of the next issues of “Student Success,” we will explore three questions about retention on our college campuses. Part I will look at the barriers to student retention, both from the extant literature, but also from interviews and surveys we’ve conducted through our workshops around the US and Canada. Part II will

focus on programs and strategies that appear to either help OR hinder student retention on campus. Ultimately, we all want answers. This discussion will provide some core issues for understanding what matters. Finally, Part III will discuss the inherent difficulties in getting buy-in on our campuses—all cam-

pus— from faculty, staff, administration, and yes, students.

Throughout the series, we look forward to getting feedback from you about your experiences and how they related to our discussion. Feel free to email us at:

studentsuccess@educationalpolicy.org

Part I. Barriers to Student Retention and Success on College Campuses

Dr. Watson Scott Swail

The discussion of why students leave campus takes us back to some theoretical underpinnings initially discussed by Spady (1970), Tinto (1975), and others. These researchers connected dropout with Durkheim’s theory of suicide, stating that when individuals are separated from the social fabric of society, they withdraw, and at worst, decide to sever the relationship completely. This theory is now used as the cornerstone of why students leave higher education and why we focus so much on the “social integration” of students on campus. Without this soft-touch social connection, students become isolated and begin to withdraw from campus. This is, in one respect, academic suicide.

In the 1980s, then-University of California-Berkeley researcher Uri Treisman (who was named “Scientist of the Year” by the Harvard Foundation on February 6, 2006) conducted a study to look at the differences of academic study hab-

its of Asian and Black students. Treisman found that the Asian students were likely to study and socialize together. In effect, they formed their own social microcosm on the campus of an institution that was largely white and largely American. Conversely, Black students were “loners,” often studying alone and less likely to “integrate” themselves into a subgroup or into the institution. The Asians prospered; the Blacks suffered. The find-

ings from Treisman’s study formed the basis for the Emerging Scholars Program (ESP), a program which provides students with an integrated supplementary program for learning. ESP is used on campuses across the United States.

Treisman’s work was truly important because it showed all that social systems on campus are uniquely and unequivocally connected to the academic progress and success of students. The two are in-

In This Issue...

1

FEATURE: *Barriers to Student Retention and Success on College Campuses*

4

INTERVIEW: *Patrick Terenzini, Penn State University*

7

THE REVIEW: *Student Success in College*, by George D. Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, John H. Schuh, Elizabeth J Whitt, and Associates.

9

BEST PRACTICE: Indiana Bloomington University

10

CASE STUDY: Retaining Students in Court Reporting School.

extricably connected, and campus officials must concern themselves with that reality. In my work, I've identified five areas that campuses should concern themselves with in the effort to support students. Each area is as important as the other, and often the dearth of resources in one area can undermine all progress. Thus, administrators must ensure that there is support across campus in these areas in order to support students.

1. Social and Academic Integration. As discussed above, the process of becoming socially integrated into the fabric of the university has also been found to be both a cumulative and compounding process, and the level of social integration within a given year of study is part of a cumulative experience that contin-

ues to build throughout one's college experience. The establishment of peer relations and the development of role models and mentors have been defined in the literature as important factors in student integration, both academically and socially.

2. Academic Preparedness. Academic integration and preparation are primary features of many models of retention. Research shows that between 30 and 40 percent of all entering freshman are unprepared for college-level reading and writing and approximately 44 percent of all college students who complete a 2- or 4-year degree had enrolled in at least one remedial/developmental course in math, writing, or reading.

3. Campus Climate. While researchers agree that "institutional "fit" and campus integration are important to retaining college students to degree completion, campus climate mediates undergraduates' academic and social experiences in college. Minority and low-income students inadequately prepared for non-academic challenges can experience culture shock. Lack of diversity, with regard to income and race/ethnicity, in the student population, faculty, staff, and curriculum often restrict the nature and quality of minority students' interactions within and out of the classroom, threatening their academic performance and social experiences.

March 19-21, 2006 * Tucson, AZ

Spring '06 RETENTION Retreat

JW Marriott Starr Pass Resort & Spa

Last Chance to Register!

Each year the Educational Policy Institute hosts two leadership retreats focused on student retention and institutional change. Our first retreat for 2006 is scheduled for March 19-21 at the JW Marriott Starr Pass Resort & Spa in Tucson, Arizona, a five-star accommodation nestled in the beautiful Sonoran Desert. The Leadership retreat is targeted at campus leadership--those individu-

als responsible for student retention, including CEOs, Vice Presidents, Directors, and key faculty and staff. During the retreat, participants will learn about the causes of student departure, how to use data effectively to better understand the departure process on their campus, and how to plan and execute institutional change focused on student retention and success. Registration is limited, so visit www.educationalpolicy.org/retentionretreat.html for more information now, call Sarah Hosford at (757) 271-6380, or email shosford@educationalpolicy.org. Teams of 4 or more participants will receive a 15 percent discount.



4. *Commitment to Educational Goals and the Institution.*

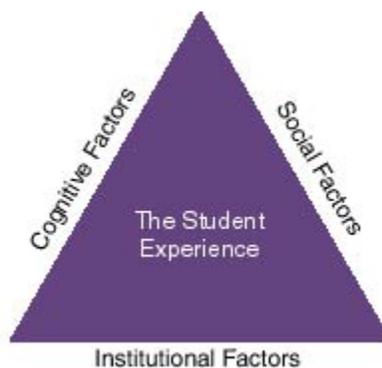
Tinto (1993) hypothesized that commitment to occupational and educational goals and commitment to the institution in which one enrolls significantly influence college performance and persistence. The stronger the goal and institutional commitment the more likely the student will graduate. Research shows that congruence between student goals and institutional mission is mediated by academic and social components, and that increased integration into academic and social campus communities causes greater institutional commitment and student persistence.

5. *Financial Aid.* Attending college and persisting to degree completion is most often rewarded with higher annual and lifetime earnings. But for many low-income and minority students, enrollment and persistence decisions are driven by the availability of financial aid. In 1999-2000, 77 percent of financially dependent students from families with less than \$20,000 in family income received some financial aid, with an average award of \$6,727. In contrast, 44 percent of those from families with income of \$100,000 or more received aid, with an average award of \$7,838.

Low-income and minority students who receive grants generally are more likely to persist than those who receive loans. However, given the rising costs of attending college, it is unlikely that low-income students will be able to receive bachelor's degrees without any loan aid. At the same time, the research also suggests that the shifts in aid from grants to loans and from need-based to merit-based programs adversely affects both enrollment and persistence for minority students. Reversing these shifts may be needed to increase college access and success for low-income and minority students.

A Framework for Student Retention

The importance of understanding the above discussion is knowing how to pull it together and what it means to the student in its entirety. I employ a simple graphic to illustrate the interaction of the student and the institution through the use of a triangle, where one side represents the cognitive attributes or skills that a student brings with him or her to campus; a second side which represents the



student's social attributes or skills; and a bottom side of the triangle which represents the level of support or, in a negative context, "interference," that the institution applies to the mix. This framework is discussed in length under Retention 101 section of the studentretention.org website as well in the publication, *Retaining Minority Students in Higher Education*, under the publications section of EPI's website (www.educationalpolicy.org).

Quickly stated, the cognitive, social, and institutional factors must be in some balance to support student success. When a student is deficient in cognitive skill, other factors must rise to make up for this deficiency. The same goes for social skills, and so on. The important knowledge gain here is that institutions must understand what each student brings with him or her in order to provide the appropriate support to ensure student success. If not, there is no guarantee that the institutional services are

providing the right set of support to the right students.

This discussion is somewhat academic. Ultimately, we need to understand what the specific factors that influences a student's decision to leave higher education. When I conduct workshops for campus officials, I typically ask participants to think back to their college days and what factors supported or detracted from their experience. The purpose here is two-fold. First, it puts the professional in a situation of a student, hence developing an opportunity for reflection. Second, it provides us with a rich discussion of what matters to students on campus. When we ask about the experiences that negatively impacted persistence and the college experience, we received the following remarks:

- Poor Relationships
- Bureaucratic Processes
- Isolation
- Connections
- Bias/Prejudice
- Sense of Failure
- Interaction
- Unsupportive Environment

The above list is a truncated version of our discussions, but you get the idea. Now compare this list with the "positive" list reported by these professionals:

- Positive interaction with a person or activity that boosted self-confidence. The "light" eventually came on
- Quality instructions, relationship with faculty, interactions, feeling of connectedness
- Relationships with faculty, advisors, peers
- Connecting with some group
- Academic growth
- Engaged, meaningful connections (personally, with peers or superiors, academically, etc.)
- Relationships with key people:

instructors, students, administrators (US TOO)

- Encouragement
- Connecting with other students and/or faculty in and out of the classroom
- Interaction with outstanding faculty/staff
- Relationships with key people: instructors, students, administrators

Notice that in both lists the issue of academics seems almost secondary, even though college is an academic pursuit. What you should notice is the importance of “connections” between students and their peers or to their instructors. This certainly underscores the “social integration” theory proposed by Spady and

Tinto over a quarter century ago. Remember, this isn’t something pulled from research or even from students. It comes from people like you who have experienced these issues first hand and through their students.

As a campus professional, you should be asking what matters on your campus. What is it that your students need to succeed, and what are the major reasons that students leave? Do the items above resonate with you and your staff? What are you doing in these areas? Are your services getting to the students that actually need them? And perhaps most importantly, are your current services effective?

If you are not currently working closely with your institutional research staff, start now. Find out what makes your students tick. Conduct exit interviews, especially of students who leave, and actually use that information for strategic planning. This isn’t a “don’t ask--don’t tell” policy. Ask and tell. Otherwise, opportunities to improve campus services are squashed.

In Part II of our series next issue, we’ll discuss strategies for success in serving students.

Dr. Swail is the President of the Educational Policy Institute.



what we learn about student retention will definitely not stay in Vegas.

be there

www.educationalpolicy.org/retention2006

CASE STUDY - National Court Reporters Association

Across the United States and Canada, there are over 45,000 court reporters charged with the task of recording court room deliberations, legal and medical depositions, and captioning for television and other media. This is a growing field that requires dedicated and talented individuals who can quickly and accurately capture spoken information with stenographic machines. However, recently, the industry has been facing a serious shortage of court reporters. According to the National Court Reporter's Association (NCRA), court reporting programs have a history of graduating only 10 percent of their students annually. Students either take much longer than expected to earn a degree or simply do not graduate at all.

To investigate this problem, the NCRA formed the Future Group, a panel made up of 11 court reporters, captioners, and a state court judge. The Future Group evaluated the future of court reporting profession and what that outlook meant for the association. The group concluded that "the traditional model of recruitment and education [of court reporters] has never experienced a significant success rate." They recommended an in-depth evaluation of the existing educational system in order to improve the quality and quantity of its graduates.

In response to the Future Group's advice, the NCRA formed the Reporter Education Commission in July of 2004 to strengthen the reporter education system and schools. To accomplish its goals, the Commission laid out a timeline of research, evaluation, and planning milestones to span a two-year period. The Commission concentrated on conducting preliminary research by interviewing instructors at both accredited and non-accredited schools. It also issued a request for proposals from outside re-

search consultants to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the educational system. In January of 2005, the Commission hired NRECA Market Research Services and the Educational Policy Institute, under the leadership of Dr. Watson Scott Swail, to conduct field research on stakeholders, including students, school administrators and court reporting firm owners.



National Court
Reporters
Association

Several important findings emanated from this research. First, the Commission found that the profession lacked a sufficient number of schools that offered a court reporting program. Second, schools that did offer a reporting program often did not adequately focus on student needs, such as financial aid, academic counseling, and access to online learning. Many students involved in the research process expressed dissatisfaction with the services and quality of instruction they received at proprietary institutions. One reason for the uneven level of education and services available to students was rooted in the NCRA's outdated theory approval system. Without the guidance of the association, institutions were left to self-evaluate their programs and assure the integrity of their curriculum and recruiting practices.

The NCRA and Dr. Swail then examined the challenges specific to the reporting and captioning profession, including training and instruction. One difficulty students faced was the highly technical nature of a typical court reporting program. Student persistence also waned as they faced high tuition costs

and were forced to take extra time to complete their program of study. "On average, court reporting education programs advertised as two years in length are taking upwards of 38 months to complete," says Patrick Mangan, Director of Professional Development and Certification for the NCRA. Conversely, institutions were unsure how to target their recruitment effort at the kind of students who would succeed in earning a degree in court reporting. The profession requires a type of intellectual student or professional, and schools need help identifying and enrolling those sorts of people.

Using the research as a foundation for further discussion, Dr. Swail conducted a series of strategic planning for the NCRA which resulted in the development of 16 strategies for program improvement. "What the NCRA needed, more than anything, was someone to come in and direct their discussion," says Swail. "In essence, I became the navigator for the NCRA. They had the knowledge; they knew what could be done. My job was to coordinate these thoughts and ensure that everyone had a voice in the discussion. Within a very short period of time we were able to get tangible strategies on the table and prioritize what should be done and when."

The Committee agreed to conduct a series of pilot projects to test education models, provide expanded professional training programs, and redesign the outdated court reporter curriculum. To effectively upgrade institutional resources and instruction, the committee decided that the NCRA had to first make it evident to schools what student departure costs them. Then, through programs like a mentoring boot camp aimed at developing advisors' mentoring skills and teacher trainings that emphasize the importance of real-life experience in the

profession, institutions could expand the services they offer their students.

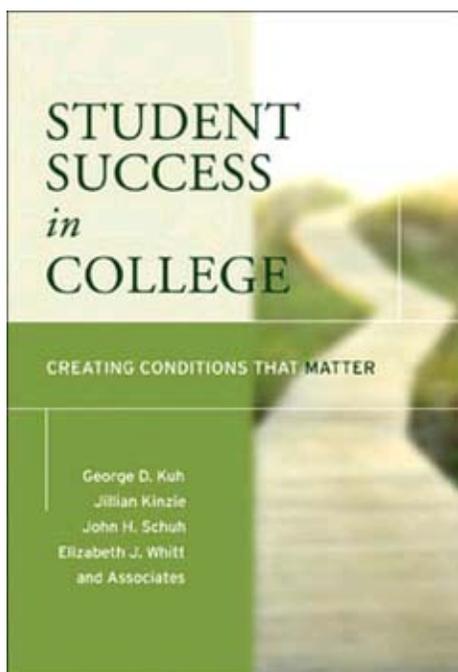
The strategic planning process has also led NCRA to develop an online qualification test to identify potentially successful students. The association will also streamline the accreditation process for NCRA schools, as well as expand its teacher training program and provide more incentive to become certified instructors.

Dr. Swail was able to get a commitment from the NCRA Commission to

carefully evaluate the impact of these strategies in order to determine their effectiveness. “To make something like this work, patience is required on behalf of all stakeholders,” says Swail. “But if they can remain determined to let the implementation process take shape, there should be significant improvement in both the quality of court reporter education and the success of students in the program.” The implementation of these efforts has begun and will continue over the next 18 months.

For more information about the strategic planning process or about the NCRA, please contact Dr. Watson Scott Swail at wswail@educationalpolicy.org or Mr. Patrick Mangan at pmangan@ncrahq.org.

THE REVIEW



Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter. George D. Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, John H. Schuh, Elizabeth J. Whitt, and Associates. Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 2005

Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter describes policies, programs, and practices employed by a diverse group of high-performing American colleges and universities to enhance student

achievement. Authors George Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, John Schuh, Elizabeth Whitt, and their associates clearly demonstrate that higher education institutions that make a campus-wide commitment to student success can make a difference in student engagement and persistence. Based on the Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project from the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University, this book provides real world examples from twenty institutions and guiding principles and recommendations that other colleges and universities can learn from and adapt to create an enhanced setting for student success.

The book is organized into four main parts: an explanation of why the authors undertook the DEEP project, a discussion of the six overarching features common to twenty high-performing colleges and universities, examples of the policies, programs, and practices of these schools, and a summary of findings and general recommendations for colleges and universities interested in enhancing student success. Written with the practitioner in mind, the authors refrain from using many research notes and references in an effort to make this book reader-friendly. The text is also intentionally descriptive, not evaluative;

readers seeking empirical evidence of the impacts of specific student success strategies are advised to look elsewhere. But college administrators and others charged with the responsibility for student success initiatives will delight in this book, which is brimming with examples of student success policies, programs, and practices that could be adapted for use on most North American campuses. Indeed, the authors encourage readers to “creatively swipe” what seems to be working at these high-performing institutions.

The pragmatic tone of this book, however, should not diminish the quality of the research upon which it is based. For the uninitiated, the DEEP project, led by George Kuh and his associates at the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University, attempts to determine how strong learning environments in higher education settings are created and sustained. The twenty colleges and universities identified as DEEP institutions for inclusion in this book were selected through a multi-stage process. First, a regression model was employed to identify four-year institutions that had higher-than-predicted scores on the five clusters of effective educational practice used by the Center’s National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). These

clusters are level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student interaction with faculty members, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment. A second regression model was then employed to determine the predicted graduation rates of these schools, and then to compare those rates with their actual six-year graduation rate. Both regression models took into account student characteristics and institutional features, including size, selectivity, and location. The twenty institutions featured in this book are among a larger number that met the criteria for higher-than-predicted student engagement and graduation.

After selecting the schools and conducting on-site research over a two-year period, the research team identified six characteristics found to be common to the twenty DEEP colleges and universities. These institutions, the authors argue convincingly, share a “living” mission and “lived” educational philosophy, an unshakeable focus on student learning, environments adapted for educational enrichment, clearly marked pathways to student success, an improvement-oriented ethos, and shared responsibility for educational quality and student success. While the identification of these characteristics clearly owes a debt to work by Peter Senge and Michael Fullan on systems theory, learning organizations, and change leadership, it is the grounding of these theories in the real world experiences of higher education institutions that makes this section valuable. The authors devote an entire chapter to each of these traits, supporting the discussion by citing specific examples from diverse DEEP institutions, which include private and public colleges, small liberal arts colleges, large research-intensive universities, historically black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, women’s colleges, and one men’s college.

These chapters contain fresh perspectives on what can make a tangible difference in student success that might surprise even the more seasoned reader. The chapter on “Environments Adapted for Educational Enrichment,” for instance, highlighted the potential of the natural and architectural setting of the campus to contribute to student success. The examples are illustrative. Sewanee’s isolated mountaintop is used as a living laboratory for environmental studies, forestry, and geology classes and as the setting for numerous student success initiatives, including the first-year orientation program. Other schools, including Evergreen State, have created architectural spaces designed to foster interaction and collaboration across the campus. Evergreen State’s Longhouse Education and Cultural Center provides a gathering place large enough to accommodate campus-wide events while symbolically representing the institution’s commitment to promoting multicultural study and understanding. Even institutions lacking these stellar natural and architectural resources find powerful ways to use their sites to support their student-centered missions and, in the process, induce students to form strong emotional attachments to the “place” of the college.

In addition to discussing these shared characteristics, the researchers also set out to identify examples of policies, programs, and practices that other institutions might “creatively swipe” and adapt to enhance student success on their campuses. Institutional policies, programs, and practices are richly described, and while concepts such as first-year seminars, capstone projects, and learning communities are not unfamiliar to higher education professionals, the authors argue that the programs themselves cannot achieve student success. It is *how* these programs are implemented that is most critical—the “fit” with the unique needs and charac-

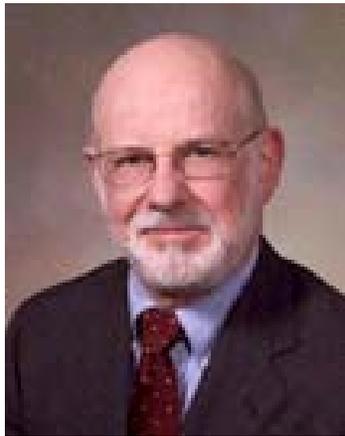
teristics of the institution, the substantial numbers of students involved with one or more of these programs, the high quality of the programs, and, most significantly, the integrated approach to achieving student success that is employed by DEEP institutions—an approach that recognizes and respects the complementarity and interdependence of an institution’s policies, programs, and practices.

Given this holistic view of student success, the authors discourage readers from using the book as a checklist of best practices and instead dedicate the final section to summarizing their findings and making general recommendations for colleges and universities interested in enhancing student success. Their primary recommendation is drawn from an important lesson learned by DEEP colleges and universities: “student success must be everyone’s business in order to create the conditions that encourage and support students to engage in educationally productive activities at reasonably high levels” (p. 295). What is needed most is an institutional culture that is fully committed to student success. The book’s concluding discussion on organizing for student success is, arguably, the most valuable section of this book.

Student Success in College is a “must-read” book for higher education administrators, faculty, and staff who are committed to making student success a priority on their campuses. This book will be most effectively employed to stimulate discussions on and provide guiding principles for campus-wide initiatives to improve student outcomes and create an institutional culture focused on student success.

INTERVIEW - Dr. Patrick Terenzini

Dr. Terenzini has 30 years of experience in higher education as a teacher, researcher, and administrator. Before coming to Penn State, Terenzini held administrative and/or teaching positions at Dean College (MA), Syracuse University, the State University of New York at Albany, and the University of Georgia. He has published 100 articles in refereed journals and made numerous invited presentations at national and international scholarly and professional conferences.



In your book, you talk about five influences that have changed research trends in the past decade. What do you see as the most important aspects that will affect research in the future?

I expect the growth in research attention to the experiences (and associated consequences) of historically underrepresented, first-generation, and low-income students to continue. And it should. The numbers of such students are rising rapidly, and they are among our empirically least-understood students. The same might be said for community college students, and while the overlap may be considerable, it's far from complete. We really do need to know more about our community colleges and their students. I *also* think practitioners and scholars need to pay more attention to the internal organizational characteristics of our institutions: how we structure ourselves, how we deploy personnel, how much we allocate to certain areas, the criteria we use to hire and promote faculty members, how much we coordinate and integrate programmatic planning within and across vice-presidential divisions. I'm increasingly inclined to think that what institutions *do* is very much more important than what they *are* (e.g., public/private, large/small, liberal arts/research

intensive, selective/not-selective, wealthy/less-wealthy). Colleges and universities are hugely complex social systems, but we continue to focus our research and programmatic efforts on discrete aspects of students' college experiences – the classroom, the residence halls, first-year seminars, financial aid, and a wide array of particularistic, well-intentioned interventions designed to promote student performance or persistence. It's more complicated than that, and trying to understand it piecemeal won't be much help.

You noticed that current research shows that, above all, “specific college experiences affect a student’s persistence and educational attainment regardless of the characteristics of the institution attended.” What advice do you have for Student Support Services administrators and staff who want to create an environment at their institution that encourages students to earn their degree?

The research makes it pretty clear that it's what happens *after* students enroll in a college or university that really matters, and we have some programmatic and policy control over the educational experiences student have (for better or worse). But I don't be-

lieve that the answer lies in “best practices” imported from somewhere else. Indeed, such a “find-the-silver-bullet” approach is likely to be only marginally effective. Individual interventions or programs work to some extent, and I don't want to under-value those efforts. But their impact is probably a good deal less than it might be if they are just one part of a larger, purposeful, integrated plan to provide the kinds of experiences and environments we know promote learning and persistence. Colleges and universities need to think systemically, to think “collaboration” both within and across organizational units. Think “integration” to create an environment in which *everyone* has a responsibility and a role to play in promoting students' learning. When that happens, persistence will take care of itself.

Community colleges have really begun to fill a void in post-secondary education, especially as the number of minority and under-privileged students continuing their education after high-school increases. Are these institutions doing a good job at educating their students and what is their role in the future of post-secondary education?

The research that has appeared since 1990 paints a rather different picture of the educational effectiveness of community colleges than does the literature published before 1990. Students' seeking a bachelor's degree who begin their college careers at a community college are still about 15 percent less likely to earn a baccalaureate degree and to attend a professional or graduate school than are students beginning at a four-year institution, even when differences in the kinds of students who attend the two types of institutions are taken into account. That gap, in my view, remains

one of the biggest challenges community colleges face. Having said that, however, other evidence indicates that (net of other factors) community college students develop cognitive skills to about the same degree as do their four-year counterparts. Some evidence also suggests that the gains are greatest among students of color, older students, and less affluent students – those who need it most and those most likely to attend a community college in the first place. Finally, once community college students transfer to a four-year institution and graduate, having started at a community college imposes no penalty on subsequent earnings. Community colleges will be a significant player in the nation's postsecondary system for a long time to come, and faculty members, administrators, scholars, and policy makers best start behaving that way.

Where do you see a need for improvement in research, practices, and services in the student retention field?

As you might have guessed from my comments above, I think practitioners and scholars alike are *seriously* underestimating the range of influences on students' learning and their persistence decisions. Those influences are a daunting array: students' individual characteristics, their expectations of college, the experiences they have once enrolled, and the internal organizational structures, practices, programs, and policies that shape those experiences. That's a formidable collection, but addressing them piecemeal will yield only marginally better performance, if that. Indeed, recent evidence from the National Center on Education Statistics suggests that persistence rates improved hardly at all from the 1980s to the 1990s, *despite* the volume and variety of efforts undertaken to change things. As I see it, we just have to stop looking for silver bullets and start thinking systemically about the characteristics or "principles" that un-

derlie any and all effective educational practices. And the more our activities, programs, policies, and environments reflect these principles, the more likely we are to succeed in increasing the educational effectiveness (and retention rates) of our institutions.

What's next for you, both at the Center for the Study of Higher Education and as a researcher?

Penn State's Center for the Study of Higher Education is the "Energizer Bunny." We have a wide variety of research programs underway, including studies dealing with equal access for low-income and historically under-represented students, engineering education, faculty members' efforts to balance careers and families, law school education, and integrating teaching and research. My own research, now and for the foreseeable future, will entail a Spencer Foundation-funded, comprehensive study (with Dr. Robert Reason) of the influences on students' first-year experiences on their academic success and persistence, and an NSF-supported study (with Dr. Lisa Lattuca) of the factors shaping the preparation of engineering graduates to enter the profession. Both of these studies are enormously interesting to me, but also, I think, highly relevant to the abilities of America's colleges and universities to educate all students, and of our engineering schools' abilities to prepare engineers for a rapidly changing economic, technical, social, environmental, and political world. Both of those projects ought to hold me or awhile!

Educational Policy Institute

"Improving educational policy & practice through research"

The **Educational Policy Institute (EPI)** is a non-profit, non-partisan, and non-governmental organization dedicated to policy-based research on educational opportunity for all students. EPI is a collective association of researchers and policy analysts from around the world dedicated to the mission of enhancing our knowledge of critical barriers facing students and families throughout the educational pipeline.

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BEST PRACTICE

Indiana Bloomington University

Indiana University Bloomington was recently awarded a five-year, \$2.1 million grant by the US Department of Education to continue its Groups Student Support Services Program. The Groups Program, established in 1968, targets students from under-represented populations and addresses the difficulties they face as they transition from high school to college. Initial funding for the program came directly from the University. Four years after its creation, the Groups program received its first Student Support Services TRIO grant from the Department of Education, though the University continues to serve as the Groups Program's major source of funding.

Since its inception, the Groups Program has provided aid to more than 9,000 students. In order to be admitted to the Groups Program, students must be residents of Indiana, have an income that meets federal guidelines, have a learning or physical disability, need academic support, meet other performance-based standards and be a first-generation college student. Furthermore, only students recommended by their high school counselors or community agency personnel may apply. These criteria are meant to aid the University in selecting those students that have the potential to succeed, but would not be able to matriculate without the high-level, individualized aid provided by the Groups Program.

Each year, Groups receives over 600 applications from high school students across the state, of which a maximum of 300 are admitted. Once they are accepted, students are required to attend three events designed to educate them about the Groups Program and prepare

them to begin classes. The series of events starts with area visits made by the Groups staff in order to outline the expectations and requirements of the program and explain financial aid options. Accepted students and their families then schedule a campus visit to learn more about the University and take placement tests. The final event in the series consists of an intensive, six-week session of writing, reading and reasoning, and math classes. Held during the summer, the classes give students a chance to develop basic academic skills, learn their way around campus, make friends and become acquainted with University resources and culture. The summer session allows these academically challenged students to acclimate themselves to the college environment before the rigors of the regular school year begin.

Another important aspect of the Groups program is its focus on the long-term success of its participants. While many retention programs concentrate solely on the freshmen year, the Groups staff recognizes that students in the program need consistent help and encouragement throughout their college careers. To that end, Groups has a Coordinator of Upperclass Initiatives, whose primary responsibilities are to increase awareness and provide activities directed towards continuing upperclassmen success. Activities may include graduate and professional internships, research and overseas studies opportunities and leadership and development opportunities for upperclassmen. To foster their students' continuing success, Groups offers a variety of aid options. The program has eight professional advisors on staff to guide students through the pro-

cess of selecting their majors, scheduling classes and fulfilling graduation requirements. Advisors use online tutorial referral forms to request tutoring services for students they see struggling with a specific course. Groups students may also use an online form to self-request a tutor.

On the financial aid front, Groups provides one-on-one counseling, as well as spring semester workshops to explore aid options and application procedures. Students may also participate in a "Navigation through Life" seminar to learn more about the University's cultural, academic, and health resources.

Groups students receive further academic and moral support in the form of the Faculty and Staff for Student Excellence (FASE) Mentoring program. Founded in 1991 by June Cargile in an effort to make the transition from high school to college easier for under-represented student groups, FASE has paired over 1700 students with mentors. Funded by the Lilly Endowment and open to all university students, FASE mentors include professors, staff members, and leaders from the Bloomington community. Mentors and mentees meet regularly during the first six weeks of the year in both academic and social settings, as well as at events organized by FASE, such as luncheons and team building retreats. Juniors and seniors who have participated in the program are eligible to become FASE Student Consultants. The Student Consultants serve as peer mentors for underclassmen in the program. FASE also employs a professional academic advisor/counselor to offer academic advising information throughout the year.

Groups honors its students who exhibit academic talent and leadership by inducting them into Chi Alpha Epsilon, a national honor society. The program also acknowledges the value of peer counseling and feedback for new students by recruiting upperclassmen to be Peer Advising Assistants, Peer instructors, and Groups Ambassadors. Assistants and Ambassadors help Groups staff with new student orientation duties, class selection, and mentoring. As the program

website states, “Students helping students is a key philosophy behind the Groups program.” In keeping with this aspect of the program’s mission, students may take classes or live together to foster “shared learning”. The shared learning environment fosters a community bond between students as they work through academic and personal problems. By sharing their experiences with peers, students begin to feel like they are part of the University’s culture and that

they have a support system that includes people working through similar difficulties.

Ultimately, the Groups Program’s success lies in its ability to inform students of the resources available to them. The individualized attention that all Groups students receive ensures that no student will slip through the cracks, proving that every student is capable of succeeding with adequate, attentive aid from the institution. The tough question is often how to achieve that balance with the staff and financial resources available.

Best Practices in Student Retention Database & Award Program

EPI’s Award for **Outstanding Student Retention Program** is presented annually to a two- or four-year institution that exhibits excellence in the development and implementation of a student retention program. Research has shown that students who drop out or stop postsecondary education not only personally suffer negative consequences, but also pass those consequences on to society and the institution itself. By honoring the excellent work being done by institutions today to create programs that use innovative means to help students realize their goals, EPI hopes to further its mission of creating opportunities for minority students at post secondary institutions.

Successful student retention programs recognize that cognitive, social and institutional factors all play a role in student retention and persistence. The most effective student retention programs address these three components by examining financial aid packages, course availability and content, as well as implementing support mechanisms such as tutoring, mentoring, and career counseling. It is also imperative to have a means of tracking students through school and monitoring the program’s success so that the institution may determine which methods are effective and those that need improvement. For example, programs may be in areas of financial aid, student services, academic services, and recruitment and admissions, among others. Individuals interested in submitting their program/strategy for inclusion in our database must complete an online registration form, which includes a program description, evidence of success, and other particulars. Eligible entries will be reviewed by a team of experts, with a prize of \$500 for the top program and acknowledgement at the **RETENTION 2006** conference in Las Vegas, May 21-23, 2006. This year’s competition closes on April 1, 2006.

To register for the database, please contact Sarah at shosford@educationalpolicy.org.

Outstanding Service Award

The Educational Policy Institute is now receiving nominations for the Outstanding Service Award for individuals who have served students and institutions well with regard to student retention. Nominations may be made by anyone who completes the online nomination form and does so by April 15, 2006. Awards will be made at **RETENTION 2006** in Las Vegas, Nevada on Tuesday, May 23, 2006. To nominate yourself or a colleague, please contact Sarah at shosford@educationalpolicy.org.