

STUDENT SUCCESS *in* COLLEGE

Promoting Student Success

Using Financial and Other Resources to Enhance Student Success

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Occasional Paper #7

Six Conditions that Matter to Student Success

- I. “Living” Mission and “Lived” Educational Philosophy
- II. Unshakeable Focus on Student Learning
- III. Environments Adapted for Educational Enrichment
- IV. Clear Pathways to Student Success
- V. Improvement-Oriented Ethos
- VI. Shared Responsibility for Educational Quality and Student Success



Howard Bowen (1996) wryly observed decades ago that colleges and universities raise all the money they can, and then they spend it. His point was that institutions have more good ideas than they can fully fund. As a consequence, they are constantly making choices as to how to best use their finite resources. Where and how resources are allocated reflect institutional priorities ideally guided by a deliberate planning process that values and supports student success.

The principles that follow for using financial and other resources to enhance student learning are based on an in-depth examination of 20 diverse four-year colleges and universities that have higher-than-predicted graduation rates and, as demonstrated through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), effective policies and practices for engaging their students. These institutions illustrate that it is not necessarily the *amount* of resources an institution allocates that is important to student success but *how* financial resources, faculty and staff time, and facilities are linked to create powerful, affirming learning environments.



National Survey
of Student Engagement

1. Link the financial plan to the institution's mission and goals

Strong performing institutions consistently allocated resources with student success in mind. Financial plans and budget development activities were transparent, enjoyed widespread support, and were integrated with academic priorities. For example, at the University of Maine at Farmington (UMF) discretionary resources are extremely limited. Most students are first in their family to go to college and from modest means. Many need to work to afford to attend college. To encourage working on campus (which is correlated with persistence), the president dedicated precious resources to create the Student Employment Initiative. The program expanded the number of campus jobs, so that now more than half of UMF's students work on campus, performing many vital services and programs and the persistence rate is increasing. The University of Michigan's Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) is a strategic financial commitment to enhance undergraduate learning and research, consistent with its mission as a research university that values undergraduate education.

2. Strategically invest in student learning

One way to invest in undergraduate student success is to make certain the reward system values teaching and student learning. In the early 1990s the University of Kansas (KU) began to intentionally seek a better balance between research and teaching. In 1997 the Center for Teaching Excellence was opened to support faculty as they implemented their ideas for improving students' learning. KU also changed the way faculty are evaluated during recruitment and for promotion and tenure, bringing undergraduate teaching into a better balance with research productivity. To help support this shift the campus adopted new course enrollment parameters. Determined to keep low enrollments in a high percentage of undergraduate courses (80% of undergraduate classes have 30 or fewer students, and 93% have 50 or fewer students) Kansas developed a few huge enrollment classes (500-1,000 students). Other schools invest in cross-disciplinary efforts to enhance learning opportunities for students. Wofford College's learning communities link humanities, social sciences, and science classes taught by teams of faculty and upper-division student preceptors—an

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approach that fuels student-faculty and student-student interaction in productive ways.

3. Design or retrofit physical spaces and places to support student learning

Construction and physical plant design at educationally effective colleges and universities are framed by how student learning can be enhanced or facilitated. Both the external appearance and the internal functionality of buildings communicate what is important to the campus community. The Johnson Center at George Mason University, the Ruth Stricker Dayton Campus Center at Macalester College and the Longhouse Education and Cultural Center at The Evergreen State College provide attractive spaces adjacent to classrooms that enable students and faculty to continue discussions after class. Similarly, small group meeting spaces are in close proximity to faculty offices at Ursinus College so that students can more frequently interact with faculty. The residential living learning centers at the University of Michigan and Longwood University were designed to encourage student-faculty interaction in these student living environments. A new residence hall at Wheaton College (MA) included an apartment for a faculty member in residence. Longwood has developed a new mall that is designed to bring together all the elements of campus life. The aim of all these efforts is to increase faculty-student interaction.

4. Front load resources to enhance student learning

New students are among those most likely to drop out of college. To help them manage academic, social, and financial issues associated with transitions, Sewanee: The University of the South, Miami University, Longwood University, and Sweet Briar College offer special programs in student residences to support newcomers. Fayetteville State University and Winston Salem State University provide redundant support systems and safety nets for first-year students. They focus on identifying students who are encountering problems. The interventions that follow require substantial investments of faculty and staff time and effort, but they pay off in improved retention and graduation rates. Gonzaga University, the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), Wheaton, and George Mason offer well-designed, high quality orientation programs for new and transfer students. In some cases the orientation programs end when classes

begin while others continue through a course that lasts the entire academic term. Gonzaga has a one credit Pathways elective course that continues into the first semester.

5. Set aside seed money for pilot initiatives and new programs that promise to enhance student success

Without adequate resources, there is limited value in developing new initiatives. Members of the campus community should know where resources may be available to support student success efforts consistent with the institutional goals. Faculty members at Michigan know that the president, provost and their colleagues are committed to finding resources to support educationally purposeful activities. Sweet Briar has a grants program for both students and faculty that individuals or teams can apply for to pursue scholarly or creative projects including student research. Because international experience is so highly valued by their institutional missions, Ursinus, Wabash College, Alverno College, and Sewanee make available financial support to assist students who cannot otherwise afford to participate.

6. Invest in events that celebrate student success

Institutions that value student success publicly celebrate those successes. Not necessarily elaborate or expensive, the events recognize individuals and groups of students, faculty, and staff for their accomplishments. They are sustained over a period of time so that they become sewn into the fabric of the campus. At Kansas, students select top faculty teachers and honor them at an annual banquet. Some outstanding teachers receive grants and stipends to acknowledge their contributions. Alverno faculty recognize students who have performed at an exceptional level of integrating knowledge and at a dinner ceremony. An on-line peer reviewed journal at California State University at Monterey Bay affords students the opportunity to work with a faculty member and publicly display their work in an academic venue. A more traditional publication opportunity exists at Wofford College where seniors in one class write a novella. One is selected by the faculty and published by the alumni association each year to celebrate the students' efforts.

7. Create partnerships across divisional boundaries

Strong performing institutions understand that student success is rooted in a supportive campus environment

and manifested as a collaborative ethic shared by many members of the campus community. Longwood offers a comprehensive service learning program, pooling resources from student organizations, student affairs, and academic affairs. The Center for Community Action and Service Learning (CCASL) at Gonzaga coordinates both community service and academic service learning and reports to the president and the vice president of Student Life. Collaboration between academic and student affairs has helped foster curricular and cocurricular service and has proved to be most helpful in terms of resources, as both areas share responsibilities for funding. Kansas developed cooperative teaching models based on a collective decision to move in that direction. At Miami, faculty and staff recognize and applaud what is an "amazing collaboration" between the academic and student affairs divisions and their leaders.

8. Use technology to tie learning elements together

Strong performing institutions concentrate resources on integrating technology into the learning environment in ways that encourage student-faculty interaction. George Mason's Technology Across the Curriculum program redesigned more than 100 courses to emphasize collaborative learning using information technology and employs technologically savvy students to coach and assist faculty with their technology needs. Students at Michigan reported being more prepared to ask questions and engage in class when they had access to class notes ahead of time on-line. The Digital Media Center (DMC) at UTEP offers a wide range of innovative applications to assist students with Math, English and Time Management and ATLAS (Access to Technology Learning and Service) insures students have access to computers.

9. Make sure you get your money's worth

Institutions that take student success seriously are steadfast in their commitment to using data to inform decisions – studying problems carefully, weighing various aspects of the issues before them, and then deciding how best to proceed. This is also true with their financial decisions. After resources are committed to programs, services and other activities, these initiatives are evaluated to determine if their impact is consistent with planned outcomes. For example, Michigan committed substantial resources to undergraduate student programs but concomitantly studied the effects of these initiatives on student learning. Alverno's signature is its ongoing,

comprehensive assessment efforts which helps keep the College focused on its mission and continuous improvement of curricular and other learning experiences.

Questions to Ponder:

There is no blueprint for creating a student success-oriented institution, nor is there a specific formula that every institution should adopt in allocating its resources. But, some questions are worth considering with respect to resource allocation that influence student learning positively.

1. How does the institution’s spending plan enhance student learning? What is the evidence?
2. How do senior leaders encourage innovation by providing financial resources to support programs designed to enhance student learning?
3. How does the campus culture support the creation of partnerships or similarly innovative approaches to developing support for new initiatives?
4. To what extent do student learning needs influence campus space planning and design
5. When expenditure patterns are reviewed, is student learning an evaluative criterion?

Answers to these questions from different types of strong performing institutions around the country are offered in *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*. The book features what 20 diverse, educationally effective college and universities do to promote student success. The Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project was supported with generous grants from Lumina Foundation for Education and the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. Altogether, the 24-member research team talked with more than 2,700 people during its 40 multiple-day site visits to the DEEP schools. Six properties and conditions shared by these colleges and universities

are discussed along with a wide array of effective educational policies and practices that if adapted appropriately can help a campus create and sustain a culture that supports student success. The book can be used in faculty and staff development, strategic planning, institutional mission clarification, leadership development, and collaborative efforts between academic and student affairs. A companion volume, *Assessing Conditions for Student Success: An Inventory to Enhance Educational Effectiveness*, will be available in September 2005 and provides a template for institutions to use to identify areas of institutional functioning that can be improved to promote student success.

Sources:

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Project DEEP Colleges and Universities

- Alverno College (WI)
- California State University at Monterey Bay (CA)
- The Evergreen State College (WA)
- Fayetteville State University (NC)
- George Mason University (VA)
- Gonzaga University (WA)
- Longwood University (VA)
- Macalester College (MN)
- Miami University (OH)
- Sewanee: University of the South (TN)

- Sweet Briar College (VA)
- University of Kansas (KS)
- University of Maine at Farmington (ME)
- University of Michigan (MI)
- University of Texas at El Paso (TX)
- Ursinus College (PA)
- Wabash College (IN)
- Wheaton College (MA)
- Winston-Salem State University (NC)
- Wofford College (SC)