

# STUDENT SUCCESS *in* COLLEGE

Promoting Student Success

## What Campus Leaders Can Do

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Occasional Paper #1

### 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



**G**raduating more students and increasing the quality of their learning are national priorities. Every college and university can improve in these areas by focusing on the educational conditions that matter to student success. Decades of research studies show that a key factor is student engagement -- the time and effort students devote to their studies and related activities and how institutions organize learning opportunities and provide services to induce students to take part in and benefit from such activities.

The guiding principles offered here are based on an in-depth examination of 20 diverse four-year colleges and universities that have higher-than-predicted graduation rates and demonstrated through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) that they have effective policies and practices for working with students of differing abilities and aspirations. These institutions value high quality undergraduate teaching, diversity and support for all students. They clearly communicate and hold students to high standards, provide timely feedback, and encourage students to actively engage with course content and faculty and peers, inside and outside the classroom. When they complement the institution's mission and values, these conditions can create powerful learning environments that lead to desirable learning outcomes that are generally independent of institutional resources or students' background.



National Survey  
of Student Engagement

### ***1. Student success is everybody's business***

At high performing colleges and universities, a variety of groups are all pushing and pulling in the same direction to challenge and support students to perform at high levels. This requires leadership and coordination from presidents, provosts, vice presidents, deans, information technology specialists, librarians, and others. Also, students seem to thrive when an institution enacts a holistic philosophy of talent development and provides support from multiple sources. In addition, improvement efforts have a much better chance of succeeding when they spring from strategic visioning exercises and enjoy the support of the president, provost, governing board members, faculty members, student life staff, and student leaders. This is true of such large, multiple-mission institutions as the University of Michigan which in the late 1980s launched its ambitious, decade-long attempt to revitalize undergraduate education as well as small, focused mission schools such as Macalester College and Wabash College.

Equally important, sustainable improvements in undergraduate education cannot be the responsibility of a single unit. Rather, innovations are more effective and influence more students when they spread horizontally to different areas and cross organizational boundaries, such as the collaborations between academic and student affairs to develop and sustain learning communities, early-alert programs, and first-year initiatives. Miami University is one such example, where senior administrators periodically remind faculty and staff of their commitment to collaboration on behalf of student success.

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### ***2. Feature student success in the institution's mission and vision statements***

Emphasizing success in the institutional mission statement is necessary but not sufficient to ensure that students will have access to and profitably use the resources they need. For this reason, in 1999 California State University at Monterey Bay embarked on a series of “vision dialogues” so that stakeholders could seek more effective ways to put its vision into practice. Another approach is to establish a multi-year agenda that encourages many people work to together on a common task that will promote student success. One example is the University of Maine Farmington's campus-wide student work initiative that substitutes on campus employment for work off campus, which better connects students to role models and offers enriching learning opportunities.

### ***3. Frequently remind colleagues of the institution's commitment to enhancing the quality of the undergraduate experience***

Faculty, staff, and students everywhere say they are overextended. No wonder many people do not understand what the institution stands for and wishes to accomplish with its undergraduate program. Different groups resonate to different approaches and use different language to communicate the same concepts. Through words and deeds, presidents, provosts, and senior academic and student life officers can help their colleagues maintain a steadfast commitment to undergraduate education, even though the institution may also feature graduate education and research in its mission. Moreover, they must believe and act on what they are saying. Presidents such as Diana Natalicio of the University of Texas at El Paso, Benjamin Dunlap of Wofford College, and John Strassburger of Ursinus Colleges use annual state-of-the-campus reports, governing board meetings, alumni gatherings, convocations, and faculty meetings to remind people on and off the campus of their institution's aspirations and its commitment to provide a high-quality undergraduate experience for all students.

Another way to reinforce the importance of student success is by publicly recognizing excellence in teaching, research, or service at ceremonial events. For example, the University of Kansas bestows more than 20 teaching awards annually, many of which carry cash stipends. Rewards and recognitions reinforce what is important and work best when they are transparent and operate in a manner consistent with espoused campus values.

### ***4. Scale up policies, programs and practices that work***

Strong performing institutions typically have in place many high quality programs and practices. Moreover, they make certain that one or more initiatives touch substantial numbers of students in meaningful ways, especially those students known to be at risk of leaving school prematurely. In some instances, when an activity is empirically demonstrated to have desired effects, it is required in some form of all or large numbers of students. For example, as part of the required first year seminar at Macalester College, students devote a Saturday early in the fall term to community service in St. Paul. All students at California State University at Monterey Bay design an Individualized Learning Plan during the required Freshman Year Experience Seminar and subsequently update it, including a systematic review

during the ProSeminar typically in the junior year. At Winston-Salem State University, new students must take a new student adjustment course which emphasizes evaluation of student abilities and study skills development. Before school starts, new students at Wofford College write a reflective essay based on a common reading and the most provocative are published along with photos of the authors. At Ursinus College, all students complete the Common Intellectual Experience in the first year and an Independent Learning Experience before they graduate, such as a research project, study abroad, or internship. All undergraduates at Miami University complete a capstone seminar. These are examples of the kinds of educationally effective activities that high performing colleges and universities intentionally thread into the undergraduate experience in order to reach large numbers of their students.

### ***5. Cultivate an ethic of continuous improvement***

What is measured gets attention. High performing colleges and universities publicly report on their performance and build feedback loops into the curriculum and other educational policies and programs. People periodically and systematically review campus priorities, policies, and practices to ensure that what is enacted is of acceptable quality and consistent with the institutional priorities and values. Such examinations can be formal, such as program reviews or accreditation self-studies in the case of Fayetteville State University or less formal such as departmental or program specific discussions about what is working well and what needs attention as is commonplace at Alverno College and The Evergreen State College. The goal is to make data-informed decision making a distinctive thread in the institution's cultural fabric, so that everyone knows it's "the way we do business here."

### ***6. Put someone in charge***

When everyone is responsible for something, too often no one is held accountable for it. Some individual or group must coordinate and monitor the status and impact of institutional student success initiatives. This could be faculty or staff members with a reputation for getting things done, such as was the case with the vice president for student affairs at Longwood University and the provost at the University of Kansas. Sometimes newcomers can be asked to lead the way – a new academic dean or student life officer with fresh ideas for better integrating students' in-class and out-of-class experiences. "In charge" parties are not necessarily expected to bring about the changes themselves, but to monitor, prod and support others who also were working

on the issues. Other key resources can be teaching and learning center staff and members of campus policy bodies.

### ***7. Recruit faculty and staff who are committed to student learning and student success***

Behind every high quality program or service are competent, caring people who share the institution's vision for student success. Thus, provosts, academic deans, and senior faculty must ensure that the right people are hired and that they are taught early on what the institution stands for and is trying to accomplish. Campus leaders must unapologetically emphasize the importance of high-quality undergraduate education while probing the commitment of potential faculty members to this cause, as is the case at The Evergreen State College, Wheaton College, and the University of Maine Farmington.

### ***8. Create space for differences***

Certain issues on college campuses are rarely resolved to everyone's satisfaction. For example, striking an appropriate balance between teaching and research often galvanizes parties into all-too-familiar positions that inhibit or foreclose alternative interpretations or reconciliation efforts. For this reason campus leaders must make it possible for people to hold and express different and sometimes conflicting views. In this way, community members can be productive while pursuing goals and aspirations that differ from those of the majority. The most common approach is holding public discussion about institutional aims and values. For example, at Macalester College, Sweet Briar College, and University of Michigan students and faculty debate not only whether their institutions are doing enough to realize their espoused aspirations for a diverse student body and faculty, but the meaning of diversity itself.

### ***9. Stay the course***

Colleges and universities do not become high-performing institutions overnight. Key actors must work on one or more initiatives for an extended period of time in order to establish them, demonstrate their efficacy, and sew them into the institutional culture in a manner that complements the college's mission, educational philosophy, policies, and practices. At Ursinus College, the provost regularly convenes new faculty members along with some senior faculty to reinforce for newcomers the institution's values and aspirations while discussing important College-wide issues.

### Questions to Ponder:

Although there is no blueprint for creating a student success-oriented institution, thinking about how these principles can be adapted to your institutional context and culture could make a positive difference in terms of student learning.

1. Does your institutional mission – espoused and enacted – unmistakably emphasize student success? And how do you know?
2. How can the philosophical and operational linkages between academic and student affairs be tightened to promote student success?
3. Who is “charged” with maintaining an institutional focus on student success?
4. What indicators are used to measure institutional performance in key areas and to determine that data inform policy and decision making?
5. To what extent do norms, reward systems and other aspects of the institution’s culture value student success?
6. How do you ensure that the “right people” are hired and learn institutional values?
7. Who on your campus convenes public conversations to strengthen academic values and remind colleagues of their responsibilities to encourage and model reasoned discourse about complicated matters and differences of opinion?

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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*Cite as:* Kuh, G. D. (2005). *Promoting student success: What campus leaders can do* (Occasional Paper No. 1). Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.

### 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)  
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Winston-Salem State University (NC)  
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