

STUDENT SUCCESS *in* COLLEGE

Promoting Student Success

Making Place Matter to Student Success

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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



Some campuses have a "special" feel about them. Students are quick to mention that they cannot imagine a better place for them personally or -- for that matter -- any better setting for a college or university. The college has become their home away from home, the place they'd rather be than any other. Generations of graduates return for reunion weekends, passing through familiar buildings and pausing at favorite spots that evoke fond recollections of what was a very meaningful time in their lives. Built structures and memories are inextricably intertwined to form deep emotional ties to the institution and to those with whom they shared this place.

Colleges and universities with such a palpable sense of place also have salutary effects on student success. In a uniquely human way, this powerful connection to something larger than oneself encourages students to engage with faculty, staff and peers in meaningful ways and compels graduates to give back to alma mater by contributing their time, talents, and resources. Administrators at other colleges long to understand and create the conditions that bond people so tightly to the institution and to one another during and after graduation.



National Survey
of Student Engagement

The suggestions offered here for creating a special sense of place are drawn from a study of 20 diverse four-year colleges and universities that have higher-than-predicted graduation rates and, through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), demonstrated that they have effective practices for fostering success among students of differing abilities and aspirations. These institutions—called DEEP schools here because they were studied for the project on Documenting Effective Educational Practices—developed campus environments that challenge and support students in distinctive ways.

1. Optimize the natural setting for student learning and success

Like beauty, sense of place is in the eye of the beholder. This was certainly the case for DEEP campuses that were located in different parts of the country and in urban, suburban and rural settings. Some were undeniably advantaged by the majesty of their surroundings, such as Wofford College’s campus which is officially designated an arboretum. Others made themselves striking by using a congruent architectural scheme and similar building materials throughout, such as the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), the only university in the western hemisphere with Bhutanese architecture. Winston-Salem State University’s architecture is a mix of old low-rise buildings and newer brick structures connected by clear pathways and nicely landscaped flowerbeds. Attractive arches signal the entrance to the campus from Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive.

“Before a place can matter, people must matter... many DEEP schools use rituals and traditions that invite the participation of all students, establish high expectations for what college will be like, challenge students to achieve at levels beyond their aspirations, and feature as role models students who demonstrate noteworthy achievements...consistent with the institution’s mission and values.”

Despite the range of natural and constructed environments, what stands out about DEEP schools is the way they adapted the settings to educational advantage. The mountain top Sewanee campus is known as “The Domain.” Its 10,000 wooded acres, 65 miles of trails, streams, waterfalls, and majestic views are used as a laboratory for teaching, research, and recreation, especially in environmental studies, forestry, and geology. Because the college manages all of the natural resources on its property, students have many opportunities to help with and learn from carrying out these important tasks. Evergreen State’s location adjacent to a densely wooded preserve and the Puget Sound offer unparalleled opportunities for students to study plants, ecosystems, and marine life. The campus small-scale organic farm is a sustainable source of food for the campus as well as a site for internships and other learning experiences. George Mason University’s proximity to

Washington DC provides unmatched opportunities for internships and other out-of-class learning opportunities. Built on a former military base, the mission of California State University Monterey Bay is to build a multicultural community that contributes productively to the state and the world. Toward this end, CSUMB requires two service learning experiences to explicitly reinforce the expectation that CSUMB students will act on what they know for the betterment of the community.

2. Adapt and align the physical environment with institutional values, priorities and goals for student success

Most DEEP schools artfully plan and maintain their physical facilities to promote student engagement. Space is dedicated for “socially catalytic” interactions, areas where students and faculty can meet informally or where students can work together on projects. The richly appointed, aesthetically lit Acorn Lounge in Wofford’s Milliken Science Center features open spaces with moveable tables and chairs near faculty offices to

facilitate student-faculty interaction, individual and group study, and collaborative work. Ursinus College redesigned space and added large tables, chairs, and laminated “whiteboards” to create “interaction areas” near faculty offices and classrooms. One faculty member characterized the space as a “visual image of achievement and aspiration.” The space inspires an intense focus on learning, whether for individual study or small group work. Gonzaga’s Unity House is “a place to come to talk about diversity, a place to hang out, a safe and comfortable home for all students.”

Student success at the DEEP institutions was buoyed through centrally located, readily accessible, and easy to find student services. George Mason’s Johnson Center is an exemplar. The entire building is devoted to student academic services, such as tutoring, career counseling, and meeting basic student needs through its food court and other offices. A library completes the environmental blending of student and academic services.

Members of the Evergreen State community are reminded of contributions of American Indians every time they see the Longhouse Education and Cultural Center. Incorporating architectural and design concepts of Northwest Indigenous Nations, Longhouse symbolizes the hospitality of the people native to the area and the institution’s commitment to promoting multicultural study and understanding.

3. Create human scale learning environments

Students are more likely to flourish in settings where they are known and valued as individuals contrasted with settings where they feel anonymous. Built structures, signage, and landscaping can buoy students' feelings of well-being, belonging, and identity. Wooded areas, courtyards, nooks and crannies provide physical and psychological space for students to pause and reflect on what they are learning, inside and outside the classroom.

Although Miami University encompasses more than 1,900 acres, it was designed to feel small, manageable, and easy to navigate. Few buildings are more than three stories, including the 36 residence halls that house 7,000 students. Most academic advisors for first-year students live in the same building as their advisees. University of Texas at El Paso's learning communities make it possible for cohorts of students to take several courses together, which reduces the psychological size of the campus, fosters meaningful peer relationships, and makes it almost impossible for a student to be anonymous.

4. Form partnerships with the local community

Another way DEEP schools take advantage of their location is to identify learning opportunities and develop partnerships that benefit students, the institution, and the community. For example, when the town of Farmington, Maine needed an indoor recreation venue, more tutors for area children, and a larger public library, the University of Maine at Farmington opened its recreation center to the community. This increased demand for fitness classes which, in turn, created jobs for students and also promoted interaction between students and community members. The university and town collaborated to expand the library, which the university and community share.

Advisory boards at DEEP colleges and universities guide the development of internship opportunities, fundraising projects, reciprocal library programs, and community service and volunteer efforts by students and staff. Among the long-standing, formal campus-community partnerships is the Century Club at George Mason, a nonprofit organization comprising business, professional, and government organizations dedicated to fostering collaboration between the university and organizations in the metropolitan area. Century Club members, in cooperation with Mason faculty and students, assist with job and internship fairs, résumé and interviewing workshops, and networking opportunities. Wheaton College students choose from over 100 internship, service learning, and research sites in Boston and Providence to gain practical experience and apply what

they are learning in the classroom. Alverno College recognizes the educational benefits of its location by involving approximately 400 community volunteers annually as "external assessors" of students' educational development. A local business owner might, for example, be asked to assess the quality of an Alverno student's business plan.

5. Create meaningful traditions and ceremonies that bond students to one another and to the institution

Before a place can matter, people must matter. Toward this end, many DEEP schools use rituals and traditions that invite the participation of all students, establish high expectations for what college will be like, challenge students to achieve at levels beyond their aspirations, and feature as role models students who demonstrate noteworthy achievements, inside and outside the classroom, consistent with the institution's mission and values. Some DEEP institutions developed a campus compact or covenant to communicate what's expected of its members, such as the Gentleman's Rule at Wabash College or the four "pillars" of a Macalester education.

Formally inducting students as full members of the community of learners is a powerful way to welcome and affirm students. Winston Salem State University (WSSU) achieves this with its moving "Lambs to Rams" ceremony early in the student's first year. During this rite of passage, new students (lambs) are figuratively "transformed" into WSSU "rams" (the school's mascot), thereby becoming full members of the WSSU community. The ceremony is marked by the pinning of the "lambs" and walking through the Arches for good luck. It was this event, students say, when they truly felt they were a full-fledged university student. As one student explained, "you have the pin to prove it!"

One of the more powerful, educationally purposeful traditions at The University of Kansas is "Traditions Night" which attracts more than 3,000 participants to the football stadium. Among other things, new students learn why it is important to always walk around – not through – the campanile. Campus lore has it if a student walks through the campanile before graduation, he or she will never graduate. One must *earn* the right to walk through it by completing degree requirements. Traditions Night is capped by asking first through fifth generation Jayhawks to stand as a torch is passed from a senior to a representative of the first-year class who is usually a 4th or 5th generation Jayhawk. All this and more underscores the importance of succeeding in college.

Questions to Ponder:

Every institution must chart its own course to create a distinctive learning environment and campus culture that imbues the student experience with a sense of specialness. As with so many aspects of institutional effectiveness, the whole of the cultural and physical properties that comprise and contribute to student success is greater than the sum of the parts. Here are some questions that can help assess the extent to which a sense of place and engagement-friendly culture characterize your campus:

1. What is special or distinctive to our school? What is special to students? To faculty? To staff?
2. To what extent do the campus physical setting and facilities complement the espoused institutional mission and values?
3. What messages and values are conveyed by built structures? In institutional ceremonies and rituals, such as orientation?
4. What traditions reinforce messages about student success? What traditions need to be changed or eliminated to foster student success?
5. How do prospective students learn about what it takes for academic success? Are all students able to find one or more affinity groups to join?
6. What aspects of the campus can be made to be more distinctive to enrich a sense of place?
7. Are learning opportunities in nearby communities in plentiful supply and used by students?

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 twenty diverse, educationally effective colleges and universities do to promote student success. The Documenting Effective Educational Practices (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 the DEEP colleges and universities are discussed in *Student Success in College* along with an array of effective educational policies and practices that, 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 to Enhance Educational Effectiveness: The Inventory for Student Engagement and Success*, 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 | |
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