

STUDENT SUCCESS *in* COLLEGE

Promoting Student Success

What Student Affairs Can Do

Elizabeth J. Whitt

Occasional Paper #5

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



Interest in creating the conditions that enhance student learning and support students in achieving their educational goals is at an all-time high. Four-fifths of high school graduates need some form of postsecondary education to acquire the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to address increasingly complex social, economic, and political issues. Student engagement -- what students *do* during college -- generally matters more to what they learn and whether they persist to graduation than who they are or even where they go to college.

The contribution of out-of-class experiences to student engagement cannot be overstated. Any institution that wishes to make student achievement, satisfaction, persistence, and learning a priority must have competent student affairs professionals whose contributions complement the academic mission of the institution in ways that help students and the institution realize their goals. The 'lessons' for student affairs practice offered here are based on an in-depth examination of 20 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.



National Survey
of Student Engagement

1. Focus on the educational mission

At educationally-effective colleges and universities, student affairs policies, programs, and services reflect a sustained commitment to achieving the institution’s educational mission. There is no debate or confusion about this, or bemoaning ‘second-class citizenship.’ Student affairs staff are full partners in the educational enterprise, creating enriching educational opportunities for students, team teaching with faculty, and helping students manage various transitions. What distinguishes student affairs policies and practices at educationally-effective colleges and universities is the degree to which they focus on creating seamless learning environments in which the boundaries between in-class and out-of-class learning are fuzzy, if not invisible. At Miami University, for example, student life programs and policies emphasize intellectual growth and challenge. The University’s first-year experience “Choice Matters” initiative encourages students to use their time wisely and reflect systematically on what they learn from their experiences inside and outside the classroom and a variety of linked programs—curricular and co-curricular, required and optional—that promote the initiative.

2. Create and sustain partnerships for learning

High-performing organizations are marked by partnerships, cross-functional collaborations, and responsive units. Effective partnerships among those who have the most contact with students—faculty and student affairs professionals—fuel the collaborative spirit and positive attitude characterizing these campuses. Co-curricular programs foster, and do not compete with or undercut, student achievement. For example, on many campuses new student orientation and fall welcome week emphasize activities that are primarily social in nature, rather than intellectual or academic. At most educationally-effective colleges, the intellectual and academic content of summer orientation and fall welcome weeks far exceeds the amount of time devoted to social events. For example, summer reading programs at Miami University, Wofford College, and Wheaton College, with programming facilitated by student and academic affairs units, set an appropriate tone and expectations for college life.

“Effective colleges and universities recognize that new students need affirmation, encouragement, and support as well as information...to create a foundation for academic and social success...”

3. Hold all students to high expectations for engagement and learning, in and out of class, on and off campus

Most colleges assign students to an advisor, offer some form of a first-year seminar, and provide opportunities for involvement in co-curricular activities, internships, and community service. But these programs cannot have the desired impact if few students take full advantage of them. Institutions contribute to student success by making certain these programs and experiences are of uniformly high quality and large numbers of students participate. Opportunities for meaningful engagement in internships, practica, and service learning experiences should be distributed widely and across the student body, not limited to full-time students living on campus. George Mason University sponsors more than 200 student clubs and organizations and goes to considerable lengths to involve students of different ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds in these and other out-of-class activities. The university attracts nontraditional-age students to such activities by offering academic credit for certain bona fide learning experiences.

4. Implement a comprehensive system of safety nets and early warning systems

Faculty and staff at educationally-effective institutions know, and behave as though, educating students is everyone’s business, and all must work together to make sure students do not fall through the cracks. High quality student support services consistent with the characteristics and needs of the institution’s students are integrated with complex, yet readily available, early warning systems to make sure students get what they need when they need it. These systems and services draw on the resources, of everyone who comes in contact with students in difficulty, including faculty, student life and residence hall staff, and student paraprofessionals. On residential campuses, residence life staff members see firsthand how students spend their time and directly communicate relevant information to the academic advisers and faculty members who need it. Wheaton College’s Student Life department holds weekly meetings that include residence life staff, athletics staff, and academic advisors to identify students in need of academic or social support. Winston Salem State University created redundant safety nets through its

First Year College (FYC) and Academic Support Services division, administrative home to all new, readmitted, and transfer students. The FYC encompasses advising and support services, required freshman seminars, peer advisors, and faculty-based early warning systems for students in academic difficulty.

5. Teach new students what it takes to succeed

Effective colleges and universities recognize that new students need affirmation, encouragement, and support as well as information about what to do to be successful. In addition, they know new students need considerable structure and support to create a foundation for academic and social success and to learn how to take advantage of the institution's resources for learning. These institutions make special efforts during student recruitment, summer orientation and registration, fall welcome week, and events throughout the early weeks of college to teach newcomers about campus traditions and rituals and provide other information about "how we do things here and what things really mean." University College at Fayetteville State is an administrative unit that provides mentoring and advising for all new students, and coordinates reading, mathematics, science, and critical thinking support programs.

6. Recognize, affirm and celebrate the educational value of diversity

Students who report more exposure to diverse perspectives in class and out of class also report higher levels of academic challenge, more frequent involvement in active and collaborative learning, and a more supportive campus environment. High-performing schools demonstrate their commitment to diversity by socializing newcomers to this value, encouraging students to experience diversity by featuring diverse perspectives in the curriculum and co-curriculum, and recruiting and supporting students, faculty, and staff from backgrounds historically underserved by higher education. Many of Longwood University's diversity-awareness initiatives take place in the residence halls. Resident assistants (RAs) help raise awareness and encourage student participation in the many events sponsored by the Office on Multicultural Affairs. Indeed, the work of Longwood RAs is integral to attaining the university's educational mission, and RAs receive helpful training and advice to carry out this role. As with all the other student affairs programs at Longwood, residence hall programming is organized around the developmental

goals that complement and support the Longwood mission.

7. Invest in programs and people that demonstrate contributions to student learning and success

Where and why an institution invests its resources makes a big difference, not only for what gets funded, but also the messages sent about institutional priorities and values. Such decisions are guided by different sources of information. High-performing colleges and universities – even those with modest resources – allocate funds to what matters most: effective education of students. The University of Maine at Farmington's "can-do" ethos and values-based decision making are levers for improvement. One example is its Student Work Initiative (SWI) program. Beginning in 1998 with an \$86,000 allocation from the UMF president, by 2003 the SWI fund had almost doubled to \$168,000. Campus jobs were created with two goals in mind: (1) to provide students with meaningful learning experiences through employment, and (2) to increase persistence and graduation rates. Now about 50 percent of UMF students work on campus; the rate of student persistence to graduation has improved from 51% to 56% and continues to climb.

8. Create spaces for learning

Strategies for fostering student success are not limited to policies and programs, but also should address the physical environments of a campus. Educationally-effective colleges and universities use every opportunity – new construction, space renovation, landscape planning, campus expansion, interior design – to create spaces and settings where learning and teaching can flourish and which reflect their commitment to student engagement. Student services are centrally located and easy to find, and spaces for informal interaction between students and faculty or staff and among students are plentiful and accessible. George Mason's Johnson Center is an entire building devoted to providing student academic services, such as tutoring, career counseling, and so forth amid a food court, the library, and several other offices. Residence halls at the University of Michigan are organized into human scale learning communities to ameliorate the potentially overwhelming physical and psychological size of the campus. Faculty offices in the residential colleges encourage more frequent informal student-faculty contacts.

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. To what extent do student affairs policies, programs, practices and budget priorities support: (a) the educational mission of the institution? (b) academic programs and priorities? (c) student learning and success?
2. To what degree do academic and student affairs offices, programs, and personnel collaborate to facilitate student success?
3. To what extent are students encouraged to participate in co-curricular experiences that enrich student learning?
4. To what extent and in what ways are safety nets and structures for students in difficulty available and used?
5. In what ways and to what extent do transition programs welcome and affirm all newcomers?
6. In what ways and to what extent are diversity experiences infused in the curriculum and co-curriculum?
7. To what degree are data used to inform and evaluate resource allocation decisions and policies and practices related to student success?

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:

Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., & Whitt, E. J. (in press). Assessing conditions to enhance educational effectiveness: The Inventory for Student Engagement and Success. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E. J. & Associates (2005). Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This is a preprint of an article accepted for publication in About Campus copyright 2005 Jossey-Bass.

Elizabeth J. Whitt is a professor in the College of Education at The University of Iowa, and coordinator of Graduate Programs in Student Affairs.

For additional briefs visit NSSE Institute Project DEEP Related Papers, http://nsse.iub.edu/institute/

Cite as: Whitt, E. J. (2005). Promoting student success: What student affairs can do (Occasional Paper No. 5). 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)
Wabash College (IN)
Wheaton College (MA)
Winston-Salem State University (NC)
Wofford College (SC)