

# **We Know How To Transform Community Colleges for Student Success.**

## **Will We?**

The key question today is whether or not community college leaders have the will to do what is known about how to transform colleges for student success.

That assertion comes from more than 32 years as a CEO in five very different settings and a decade of work with colleges and organizations around the country. Lessons from the field come from coaching ten colleges, while directing leadership coaching for Achieving the Dream, playing a leadership role in delivery of more than two dozen trustee institutes, and directing a major collaborative of eight community colleges and 11 public school systems.

College leaders must step-up and decide to create institutions focused on student success and completion. An understanding about the data on student progression through the college should be enough to motivate the decision. Critical to that courageous step is also the understanding and support from a board willing to have “the back” of a CEO.

Given a supportive board and the will to decide on transformation, there are clear steps to be taken to create the culture for change.

The notion of a culture of evidence, inquiry, and accountability providing a foundation for courageous conversations has emerged during the past decade as a guiding principle. Tracking student-unit data over

multiple years (up to at least six years) provides the starting point. Institutions creating that capacity then frequently go through the “stages of grief” as they see how many students are lost along the way.

Engaging campus constituents in a collaborative effort to improve outcomes is crucial as a next step. That should flow easily from the important accreditation efforts already underway in most institutions. The concerns about student learning outcomes and the need to demonstrate continuous improvement reinforce the findings from a careful, collaborative review of data on student success.

Often overlooked is the power of a carefully designed planning process which includes a strategic vision, priorities for the future, consistent operational plans, and the allocation or reallocation of resources (people, space, time, and money). The student success agenda should be at the core of strategic thinking, and priorities for the future should emerge from environmental scanning and student progression data.

Colleges doing this work in a serious way are driven to review current policies, organizational structures, and staffing patterns. Practices around curriculum development and schedule creation must be redesigned once data-informed conversations become the norm. College personnel are often shocked when they see that 75

percent of all students are enrolled in only 25 courses, and that failure rates in at least ten of those courses are entirely too high.

A systematic review of student success in courses and programs will typically lead to a focus on the lack of student success in developmental/remedial courses. An American Association of Community Colleges Implementation Team, co-chaired by this writer, will present ideas for the redesign of developmental programs at the April convention. Ideas about how to accelerate progress, how to connect students, how to contextualize offerings, and how to provide “high tech-high touch” services will be featured.

None of the above-mentioned activities can gain traction without the full engagement of faculty, including adjunct faculty, who really carry the load in developmental education in most colleges. That means a focused professional development effort becomes an imperative.

Reviewing activities like those described often provoke reactions such as “not all students belong in college” or “students have the right to fail” or “you just want us to lower standards” or “K-12 is not sending us college-ready students.” However, the emerging culture allows for a focus on how to change the college so that more students can succeed. It leads to clarity about what students should know and be able to do as a result of their experience in the college. It can also lead to the engagement of student leaders in the appropriate definition of student responsibility for their own learning and progress.

Successful colleges are developing clarity about what the student experience should be. Starting at the front door of the institution, a prescribed pathway is emerging to engage students in the activities known to foster success. A refresher experience before an assessment test, required orientation which may connect students with others who have similar interests (affinity groups), mandated advising (may be group advising), development of an educational plan for all students, enrollment in needed developmental experience (high tech-high touch), and a student success course to help students learn how “to do college” are examples of promising developments. Some colleges are even developing default schedules for interest groups such as STEM, health careers, business, communications, and arts and humani ties.

Career and technical programs are offering basic skills in the context of the first program courses. These are but a few of the promising practices being developed in colleges with a focus on student success and completion.

Other high-impact practices are emerging throughout the colleges where the culture fosters efforts to improve outcomes.

Some colleges are making their “big bet” on collaborative and cooperative learning practices in the classroom. That type of approach can be labeled a best practice. Others are creating learning communities to connect students with a college team focused on their success. Still others see supplemental instruction as an answer; or, mandated participation in a learning lab is seen as the better alternative. New math

pathways leading to college credit in statistics or quantitative reasoning are being created as alternatives to the traditional path to algebra. One could go on, but space is limited. The point is that a college with a culture of evidence and inquiry will, through collaborative work, begin to develop and take to scale (emphasis added) the approaches with promise to increase student attainment.

The type of work being described frequently leads to a realization that there are gaps in outcomes between groups of students on the basis of race, ethnicity, age, gender, or family income. Unfortunately, students of color (particularly men) are not as successful. The disaggregation of data is critical if an institution is to make progress toward equity in student outcomes. The pursuit of cultural competence for individuals and the organization should be in the forefront of college-wide initiatives if there are gaps in the success outcomes. This clearly has implications for professional development programs.

College leaders in successful institutions are paying particular attention to the following:

- Evaluating interventions and practices;
- Recruiting a diverse group of administrators, faculty, and staff;
- Making choices of appropriate technology to enhance teaching and learning;
- Fostering data-informed decision making; and,
- Implementing high impact practices at

scale.

When asked about what gets in the way of the focus described here, Achieving the Dream coaches usually describe competing priorities and the overload of too many initiatives. Thoughtful leaders need to be about the business of building a collective vision and creating a collaborative sense of responsibility for student persistence, learning, and attainment. In pursuit of the vision, they should work to integrate multiple initiatives to create a holistic student success agenda.

Engagement strategies focused on the people of the college almost always include convenings involving all constituent groups. Town hall meetings, data summits, and convocations followed by roundtable discussions and breakout groups are particularly effective if well-planned and well-executed.

Effective boards will work with CEOs to create a way to monitor progress through scorecards, dashboards, or key performance indicators. They will then be in a position to provide appropriate support for the CEO with the will to decide the college can do better.

#### SOLVING THE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT PUZZLE

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This article is the continuation of a series authored by principals involved in National American University's Roueche Graduate Center and other national experts identified by the center. John E. Roueche and Margaretta B. Mathis serve as editors of the monthly column, a partnership between NAU's Roueche Graduate Center and Community College Week. For additional information send