

# Making Student Success a Priority

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**D**emanding economic conditions and heightened levels of external accountability, especially from regional accreditors, are requiring community colleges to deal more strategically with helping students meet their desired learning goals. A central issue in this increasing public scrutiny is student success, which includes but is not limited to the common measures of graduation, transfer, and retention rates. Nonetheless, a 2004 American College Testing (ACT) study of more than 400 public and private community colleges found that almost 28 percent of these community colleges functioned without any strategic goals regarding student retention and tended to attribute attrition to student rather than institutional characteristics.

Nationally, this issue has become the focus of such programs as the Achieving the Dream initiative for addressing barriers to student success for low-income students and students of color, the Foundations of Excellence project to enhance the first-year student experience, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's recent philanthropic focus on community college completion rates. Of particular interest to such reform movements has been the success rate of first-year students, who arrive at these institutions with wide-ranging academic abilities, needs, and aspirations. In a 2008 report, ACT found that public community and technical colleges had the lowest first-to-second-year retention rates within higher education, at just 53.7 percent. As discussed below, the trustees of such institutions can help ensure that their organizations are programmatically and fiscally able to meet the needs of these students by providing leadership firmly committed to:

- Making data-informed decisions that are student-centered, measurable, and grounded in best practices; and
- Ensuring that their respective institutions embrace a planning framework that is focused on comprehensively reviewing all aspects of the organization and which engages the collective input and participation of all key stakeholders.

These principles would serve as an anchor in attending to the ultimate outcomes of:

- Comprehensively assessing a college's status and capacity to support student success and;
- Based on such an assessment, establishing an informed prioritized strategic action plan that would look to improve student outcomes and student success.

## Establishing a Culture of Evidence

Unfortunately, extensive use of data to inform decisions remains more an aspiration than a reality for most colleges and universities. Achieving the Dream and other initiatives aimed at improving student success have found that inadequate data, poor-quality data, and limited capacity for data analysis often hamper improvement efforts. A recent study by the Association for Institutional Research (AIR), for instance, found that most community colleges invest less than one full-time position in data reporting and institutional research. Further, the most common statistical tool available to most community colleges' IR offices is Microsoft Excel, a simple spreadsheet program, rather than the more powerful and flexible statistical software packages commonly used by four-year institutions.

While grant makers and accrediting bodies have increased pressure on colleges to use data for decision making, a process often referred to as a "Culture of Evidence," many colleges have yet to invest in the personnel, data-management systems, and statistical software needed to understand what campus practices do and do not contribute to student success. In the absence of sound data, campuses are tempted to make decisions with only the thinnest of evidence or anecdotal stories as guides. Unfortunately, many institutions report that investments in national assessment and testing efforts, despite requiring precious fiscal resources and classroom time, have failed to produce actions that improve campus performance. In essence, it is clear that data alone do not drive change.

To build campus capacity to gather, manage, interpret, and use data at community colleges, trustees should be prepared to

support initiatives that allow them to grow their own IR talent. Even modest investments in people can provide significant payoffs in using new and existing data to explore and predict student success. Additionally, in moving towards a culture of evidence, trustees can aid in supporting that process by asking the right questions. These questions would include:

- Are campus data systems in place to capture and track student learning outcomes — not just student grades?
- Does the campus have personnel with the time and capabilities to turn data into information for decision makers?
- Are data readily available to faculty, department leaders, and others who make decisions that impact student success?
- Do campus personnel seek and use data to prove successes and manage improvement?
- Are goals and objectives measurable and linked to data collections?
- Has the campus developed a group of peer institutions for benchmarking and comparisons?
- Are campus data regularly disaggregated in reports to reveal differences among subgroups (rather than just presented as an average of the whole campus)?
- Do campus leaders cite data when announcing changes and new initiatives?

## Successful Models for Student Success

Unlike their counterparts at most four-year colleges, new students do not tend to enter community colleges at a common age and time, which makes them harder to identify and respond to as a unique cohort. To increase their likelihood of success, leaders not only need access to data, but they also need to study, identify, and target entering students for special interventions. This requires developing a strategic plan for improving the beginning college experience.

Two successful national models that use data and a comprehensive review and planning framework as an anchor in developing customized institutional strategies towards enhancing student success are the Foundations of Excellence and the Achieving the Dream initiatives. Since 2004, the Achieving the Dream initiative has worked with 82 community colleges in 18 states to help them to use data to better understand their students' experiences. The Foundations for Excellence® initiative of the nonprofit Policy Center on the First Year of College has engaged 47 community and technical colleges since 2005 in a voluntary, comprehensive self-study that addresses the central question of what colleges need to do to create an excellent beginning-student experience relative to its institutional mission and type of students. Both projects use similar evidence-based self-study and planning processes that intentionally engage a broad representation of campus constituents who work closest with our students. Through their respective processes, they are able to:

- Affirm what is working well, while identifying areas of weaknesses and ultimately producing recommendations to address them;
- Collect evidence on a wide range of student and institutional

characteristics, policies, and practices pertaining to new, low-income, and students of color; and

- Create an action plan for improving new student success and submitting the action plan for institutional governance buy-in and ultimately endorsement by the board of trustees. Key questions that trustees should ask in order to best support such review initiatives include:
  - What are the institution's current initiatives to enhance success of new students?
  - What do we know about the effectiveness of those initiatives?
  - What actions have we taken based on assessment of those initiatives?
  - What new initiatives should be taken — both those that would require no new resources and new resources?
  - For initiatives for which resources currently do not exist, what are possible sources of external funding and what actions have been taken to pursue these?
  - How do we compare with our peer institutions with respect to pursuit of such initiatives?

## Conclusion

Trustees can help ensure student success from a policy perspective by insisting on institutional strategic planning that is informed by data and based on input from a wide range of stakeholders. Such a process will result in a student-focused plan that is transparent, measurable, time-bound, and accountable.

### RESOURCES:

Research Development Opportunities:

- Online IR certificates from Pennsylvania State University [www.ed.psu.edu/educ/eps/ir-certificate](http://www.ed.psu.edu/educ/eps/ir-certificate)
- Online IR certificate from Florida State University [www.fsu.edu/~elaps/he/certresearch.htm](http://www.fsu.edu/~elaps/he/certresearch.htm)
- Association for Institutional Research Institute [www.airweb.org/?page=995](http://www.airweb.org/?page=995)

### ORGANIZATIONS:

- Achieving the Dream Initiative: [www.achievingthedream.org](http://www.achievingthedream.org)
- Foundations of Excellence: [www.fyfoundations.org/](http://www.fyfoundations.org/)
- American College Testing (ACT): [www.act.org/research/policymakers/reports/retain.html](http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/reports/retain.html)  
[www.act.org/path/postsec/droptables/pdf/TwoYearPublic.pdf](http://www.act.org/path/postsec/droptables/pdf/TwoYearPublic.pdf)
- The Association for Institutional Research: [www.airweb.org/?page=16](http://www.airweb.org/?page=16)

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