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Piecing Together the Student Success Puzzle

Research, Propositions, and Recommendations

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ASHE Higher Education Report

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Kelly Ward, Lisa E. Wolf-Wendel, Series Editors

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Executive Summary

Creating the conditions that foster student success in college has never been more important. Unfortunately, members of some of the fastest-growing groups in the United States continue to be underrepresented in postsecondary education. Participation rates by African American, Hispanic, and Native American students, first-generation students, low-income students, and students with disabilities continue to lag well behind white and Asian students.

This report examines the complicated array of social, economic, cultural, and educational factors related to student success in college. By “student success,” we mean academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills, and competencies, persistence, and attainment of educational objectives.

First, the report summarizes the major theoretical perspectives on student success in college: sociological, organizational, psychological, cultural, and economic. It then synthesizes the major research findings related to three key areas: students’ background and precollege experiences, students’ postsecondary activities emphasizing engagement in educationally purposeful activities, and postsecondary institutional conditions that foster student success. Our analysis leads us to seven propositions about student success; we then offer recommendations for action to address each proposition and identify areas where more research is welcome.

Propositions and Recommendations

The trajectory for academic success in college is established long before students matriculate. There is no substitute for rigorous academic preparation in

elementary and secondary school. If students do not attain grade-level proficiencies—particularly in math and reading—by the eighth grade, they are much less likely to acquire the needed skills in high school, which makes early intervention even more important.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that all students have rigorous, intensive precollege academic preparation.
- Develop a comprehensive national college readiness strategy that addresses the educational needs of all students.
- Align high school curricula with college performance standards.
- Instill in K–12 educators an assets-based talent development philosophy about teaching, learning, and student success.

Family and community support are indispensable to raising a student's educational aspirations, becoming college prepared, and persisting in college. The odds of earning a baccalaureate degree increase substantially for students whose families are better informed about postsecondary educational opportunities and costs and who support and encourage their student to prepare for college. Effective school-community partnerships with well-designed college encouragement and readiness programs are also essential.

Recommendations:

- Expand the scale and scope of demonstrably effective college encouragement and transition programs.
- Ensure that students and families have accurate information about college, including real costs and availability of aid.

The right amount and kind of money matters to student success: too little can make it impossible for students to pay college bills; too much loan debt can discourage students from persisting.

Affordability is a critical factor that determines whether students and their families believe college is within reach and worth making the effort to prepare for academically. For many historically underserved students, the

perceived—and—in many cases—actual—cost of college is a major impediment to becoming ready for college and seeking admission.

Recommendations:

- Align financial aid and tuition policy so that financial assistance packages meet students' need.
- Create small pockets of emergency funds to meet students' financial needs in “real” time.

Most students, especially those who start college with two or more characteristics associated with premature departure, benefit from early interventions and sustained attention at various transition points in their educational journey.

In the first weeks and months of college, underprepared first-generation students and ethnic minorities at predominantly white institutions are especially prone to struggle academically and socially, particularly those from lower income levels. Special efforts are needed to support and encourage these and other at-risk students early in the college experience.

Recommendations:

- Clarify institutional values and expectations early and often to prospective and matriculating students.
- Concentrate early intervention resources on those with two or more risk factors.
- Provide multiple learning support networks, early warning systems, and safety nets.

Students who find something or someone worthwhile to connect with in the postsecondary environment are more likely to engage in educationally purposeful activities during college, persist, and achieve their educational objectives. When students belong to an affinity group, develop a meaningful relationship with one or more faculty or staff members, or take responsibility for activities that require daily decisions and tasks, they become invested in the activity and more committed to the college and their studies.

Recommendations:

- Make the classroom the locus of community.
- Structure ways for more commuter students to spend time with classmates.
- Involve every student in a meaningful way in some activity or with a positive role model in the college environment.

Institutions that focus on student success and create a student-centered culture are better positioned to help their students attain their educational objectives. Among the institutional conditions linked to persistence are supportive peers, faculty and staff members who set high expectations for student performance, and academic programs and experiences that actively engage students and foster academic and social integration such as first-year seminars, effective academic advising, peer mentoring, advising and counseling, summer bridge programs, learning communities, living-learning centers, and undergraduate research programs.

Recommendations:

- Instill in postsecondary educators an asset-based talent development philosophy about teaching, learning, and student success.
- Use effective educational practices throughout the institution.
- Use technology in educationally effective ways.
- Give institutions incentives to identify and ameliorate debilitating cultural properties.

Focus assessment and accountability efforts on what matters to student success. Institutional effectiveness and student success will not improve without valid, reliable information to guide change efforts and monitor performance.

Recommendations:

- Conduct periodic examinations of the student experience inside and outside the classroom.
- Provide incentives for postsecondary institutions to responsibly report and use information about the student experience to improve teaching, learning, and personal development.

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- Provide incentives for postsecondary institutions to adopt a common reporting template for indicators of student success to make their performance transparent.
 - Further develop state and institutional capacity for collecting, analyzing, and using data for accountability and improvement purposes.

Needed Research

To increase the number of students who earn a baccalaureate, we must:

- Determine the more effective approaches for encouraging different types of students to participate in and benefit from postsecondary encouragement programs.
- Identify effective ways for colleges and universities to inform high schools about their graduates' college performance and *use* the information to improve.
- Determine the most efficient way of using financial aid to encourage students' preparation for college and to make college affordable for students who need financial support to attend.
- Determine what postsecondary institutions can realistically do and at what cost to help academically underprepared students overcome the deficiencies they bring with them to college.
- Verify effective approaches that foster success of different groups of students at different types of institutions.
- Determine responsible, informative ways to accurately measure, report, and use student success indicators for purposes of accountability and improvement.

Conclusion

Who students are, what they do before starting their postsecondary education, and where and how they attend college all influence their chances for obtaining a baccalaureate degree or another postsecondary credential. Postsecondary institutions cannot change the lineage of their students. Campus cultures do

not change easily or willingly. Too many long-held beliefs and standard operating practices are tightly woven into an institution's ethos and embedded in the psyche of faculty leaders and senior administrators, some of which may be counterproductive. Even so, most institutions can do far more than they do at present to implement interventions that can change the way students approach college and what they do after they arrive.

This review demonstrates that we know many of the factors that facilitate and inhibit earning a bachelor's degree. The real question is whether we have the *will* to more consistently use what we know to be promising policies and effective educational practices so as to increase the odds that more students get ready, get in, and get through.

Foreword

In this era of No Child Left Behind, higher education is being asked how it can be more accountable. How do we know that college students are learning what we hope they are learning? More important, do we know what we hope they are learning? Both of these questions are difficult to answer, but if we do not answer them, someone else will. Case in point: Secretary Spelling's final report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education suggests the need for universal outcome measures for institutions of higher education—a scary prospect. This monograph does not propose a single measure of college students' success—nor should it—but it does offer a comprehensive examination of what colleges and universities have been doing to hold themselves accountable for student success.

Concerns about how student success is measured are not new. In 1985, Alexander Astin argued that institutions of higher education too often judge their success based on student input characteristics: those schools decreed the best are those that attract the best students. Similarly, when students were not successful, we attributed their failure to the student rather than to the institution. In place of this model, which is still too prevalent today, Astin (1985a) suggested that colleges and universities should control for the input characteristics of their students to determine the value added by the college experience. And he proposed to do so by looking at a variety of outcome measures of student success—learning, grades, retention, graduate degrees pursued, career attainment, to name a few. In this monograph, Kuh and his colleagues have done just as Astin suggested and taken it a step farther. They have compiled the most complete and up-to-date research on the factors that influence