

Crossing the Finish Line: Cultivating Student Success at an Institutional Level

Filed in [Uncategorized](#) by [admin](#) on May 5, 2014 • [0 Comments](#)

It's graduation season! As a student affairs practitioner that works primarily with first generation college students, I have a particular fondness for watching our students cross the finish line. This time of year often allows us to meet parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents and younger siblings. The smiles on everyone's faces are a visceral reminder that college completion can be a huge step forward for entire families and communities. This season is also a time of personal reflection for me and, as we head rapidly towards summer, I've been thinking a lot about how we can frame student success work at an institutional level.

Some background: in the last six years, I've worked as the director of a retention, persistence, and graduation department for low-income students, first generation students, and students of color at DePaul University. I've been privileged to work with a brilliant, passionate staff and a broad network of colleagues that care deeply about the holistic success of all of our students. The last six years have afforded us numerous failures (let's be real!) and some stellar successes as we seek to shift the first-to-second year persistence rates and four-year graduation rates for some of our highest-risk students. One idea that continues to guide our practice is to think of the institution as an ecosystem, where every entity and structure is actually connected and any dysfunction (or function!) in one area results in correlative effects throughout the institution. We talk a lot about silos in higher education, but I feel that it's often only us, the staff and faculty, that exist in silos...our students experience higher education as whole people that move fluidly throughout the institutional ecosystem and need to be challenged and supported holistically.

I was recently asked to give a presentation on how to cultivate student success at an institutional level. In my search for a coherent response to this challenging question, I came up with a three-part framework for what an ecosystem approach can look like. I thought it might be useful to share these ideas with my friends and colleagues and see how you conceptualize student success and what holistic approaches you've seen institutions take to help all students cross the finish line.

Three Elements for Creating a Positive Feedback Loop of Student Success

We have to create and harness positive feedback loops if we want to cultivate an ecosystem for student success. In ecosystems, perpetuative cycles can be described using the idea of a positive or negative feedback loop. "*X creates Y which, in turn, creates more X.*" For example, as student affairs practitioners we see this positive loop between engagement and academic enrichment all the time – meaningful student engagement creates greater academic enrichment that, in turn, creates further breadth and depth of student engagement. In the following section of this post, I will describe three elements that I feel

are critical to establishing a positive loop for student success at the *institutional level*.

Taking any model to an institutional level requires some abstraction, so I'll share a few tangible ideas after each element to help illustrate what I'm describing. These elements are not described in an order of importance, as they are all equal parts of a cyclical process. Furthermore, this is absolutely not an exhaustive list of everything institutions can do to engender student success, but more a conversation starter for us to think comprehensively about our campuses and our approaches to student empowerment.

Element 1: Connections

Our silos produce risk, as they create gaps in which students can either get stuck or slip through. One of the ways we can try to mitigate the silo-effect of institutional structure is to create thick lattices of interconnectivity across the institution.

Example: When thinking about students and risk, we need to think of faculty as first-line responders...as they actually have eyes on all of our students. Each fall, I teach a class in our First Year Experience and, as a faculty member, I see everything from academic risk, psychological risk, emotional risk, and social risk appear in the classroom. When I connect with other faculty and talk about what I see and the actions I take to help students remediate these challenges, my faculty colleagues often share with me that they are noticing the same things, but aren't always sure of what to do with the risk they encounter. Creating clear, concise pathways for faculty to connect students in distress with the appropriate institutional resources is a key step in leveraging faculty-student relationships as a driver for persistence.

Do faculty have a single web page they can go to that helps them figure out what to do with "distressed and distressing" students at your institution?

What technological investments can be made to empower faculty to deploy an alert or early warning for a student? These alerts can be directed to the student's academic advisor, or a more nuanced system can be used to direct the alert to the appropriate resource/advocate based on the type of alert the faculty member submits.

How are contingent (adjunct or part-time) faculty trained in managing student distress at your institution? Can watching a short video tutorial be a required part of new faculty orientation? This video can quickly walk faculty through your institution's triage process for student risk.

Element 2: Intentionality

Since the student success conversation has gone viral in higher education, the vast majority of campuses are doing something to try and engender greater persistence and graduation rates. While all of this "doing" is admirable, we often do not take the time to approach the work with a depth of intentionality that can greatly enhance the outcomes of our efforts.

Example: Many institutions have numerous retention efforts operating in student affairs, specific academic colleges, and even in their admissions recruiting practices. I often find that these institutions began these efforts without first thoroughly mining their local data to accurately understand the terrain of risk for their students in particular. A close examination of your students' performance and persistence data might surprise you and reveal that the "at-risk" student looks different at your institution than you thought.

Use the data to determine specifically what can drive success at your institution. At DePaul, a longitudinal analysis of student performance data revealed that our single biggest predictors of four-year graduation rates was the number of credits completed at the end of the first year and the GPA attained at the end of the first year. Within all of the varying achievement patterns, we were then able to isolate particular signs of acute risk, numerically. So, students that weren't completing 12 credits per quarter, or students that finished their first year with less than a 2.5 GPA, were particularly at-risk of not graduating anywhere near the 4 year mark. This discover then allowed us to ask two critically important questions, "What do we know about the students that have historically not achieved these success metrics?" And, "What do we know about our students that have historically achieved these success metrics?" From there, we were able to develop numerous interventions and success models that emerged *from the data*, rather than from assumptions.

Students of color are often rendered monolithically as an at-risk group... I urge you to look at the data closely. There might be specific portions of this large category that are experiencing a much greater failure rate than other portions. For example, you might find that your Asian American men are underperforming when compared to Asian American women by significant percentages. Or, you might find that race, in isolation, is not a strong measure of risk on your campus, but that your students of color that are also first generation college or Pell-eligible might be experiencing acute risk. Intersectional uses of data can produce powerful revelations about higher-risk student groups that might not be on your radar at this point. In a world of finite and ever-shrinking resources, it is critical that we direct our work towards the students that need it the most and this is far more possible with intentional data-mining.

Element 3: Seamlessness

The collegiate journey can often be thought of as a "beginning, middle, and end" experience. But, between each of these phases of student life are a series of handoffs that are often disjointed and jarring. The cracks and fissures in these handoffs produce risk that can severely diminish student outcomes at each critical phase in their journey.

Example: From a student affairs perspective, we often think of the retention and persistence challenge starting with Welcome Week activities. Or, at some forward-thinking institutions, maybe we start our student success initiatives during orientation. Students start their journey with us, however, as prospects. They move from prospects to being students when they deposit with us and sign up for an

orientation session. Finally, after orientation, they end up in our classrooms as active students. This handoff, between Admissions, orientation staff, and faculty partners is often compartmentalized, disjointed, and laced with cracks for students to slip through or get stuck in. Creating seamlessness in this handoff takes a coordinated approach from prospect-to-active student, where student success messaging and engagement is occurring the entire way through.

As students consider your institution, are they offered targeted messaging based on the identities they hold? If you know that first generation students face acute risks at your institution and that you have several key support services for these students, can first generation prospects be made aware of these services from the minute they consider your institution? By creating an early affinity between the student and the necessary services at your institution, you create a greater likelihood that your higher-risk students will utilize these services upon attending your college or university. Higher-risk students are almost all considered “low help-seeking” and it is critical to create normative messages from the first point of contact with these students that say: “These services will be a part of your experience at our institution.”

When students deposit with your institution, can specialty offices that serve various higher-risk student groups be provided with lists of these students’ names and their contact information? For example, after May 1st, my department is provided with the names of all of the students that deposited that are men of color from the Chicago-metro area. We know, from intentional data-mining (see Element 2!), that these students face greater risks in succeeding at our institution so we start outreaching to them right when they deposit. Each student is called by one of our peer leaders that also identifies as a man of color and we invite them to participate in one of our first-year male empowerment initiatives. By not waiting until they’ve already set foot on campus, we are able to engage a larger percentage of this tough-to-reach group.

Conclusion

In the last six years, I’ve found myself coming back to these three elements time and time again. Connections, Intentionality, and Seamlessness appear to me to be powerful Elements that create conditions for student success. Since our campuses are ecosystems, I have found enhancements in any one area to produce positive loops that contribute to enhanced outcomes in other areas. This is both refreshing and inspiring, but also a key reason to get your campus community involved in the national movement for persistence and graduation. In this post, I’ve shared examples to try and illustrate how these Elements can be applied to aspects of the student success ecosystem, but the ideas are much more expansive than my examples and I urge you to apply these Elements to your institution to see what examples emerge from your own analyses. Even better, leave me a comment and share ideas or Elements that you’ve seen work at your institutions. How have you witnessed improvements in student success, at an institutional level?