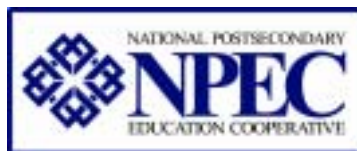Developing Vision

Distinct Values

Diverse Voices

Postsecondary Success and Pluralism:
A Call for Systemic Coherency

Donna M. Alvarado
Aguila International

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POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS AND PLURALISM:
A CALL FOR SYSTEMIC COHERENCY

The five NPEC-commissioned papers[1] to be discussed by the Plenary II Panel offer insightful approaches for policymakers and institutional leaders to increase the level of student success, as defined by retention and degree attainment, as well as by comprehensive learning, student satisfaction and career outcomes. These recommendations offer valuable options for improving success among cohorts who have been traditionally underrepresented in postsecondary education attainment.

The first overarching question addressed in these papers is the expansion of the definition of success beyond retention and degree completion rates, as important as these indicators are in their own right to educators and policymakers alike. In acknowledging the importance of learning assessment and economic return on investment in gauging student success outcomes, the authors underscore the desire of policymakers to ensure that the investment of public dollars in postsecondary education is yielding the return on investment that is most valued by students, families, employers, communities, the states, and the nation.

A second issue that has been raised—and is overwhelming to policymakers—is the sheer magnitude of the increased numbers of students who must succeed at the postsecondary level in order to effectively compete in a changing world. This was starkly illuminated by the authors of "What Matters to Student Success: A Review of the Literature" when they quote McCabe (2000)[2]:

> *...four-fifths of high school graduates need some form of postsecondary education to prepare them to live an economically self-sufficient life and deal with the increasingly complex, social, political and cultural issues they will face.*

And of course, this staggering statistic does not address the fact that 3 out of 10 of today's high school freshmen are dropping out without graduating in the first place.

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[1]Braxton, J. M. (in press). *Faculty professional choices in teaching that foster student success*.

Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (in press). *What matters to student success: A review of the literature*.

Perna, L. W., & Thomas, S. L. (in press). *A framework for reducing the college success gap and promoting success for all*.

Smart, J. C., Feldman, K. A., & Ethington, C. A. (in press). *Holland's theory and patterns of college student success*.

Tinto, V., & Pusser, B. (in press). *Moving from theory to action: Building a model of institutional action for student success*.

[2] McCabe, R. H. (2000). *No one to waste: A report to public decision-makers and community college leaders*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.

In my state of Ohio, we have success rates of 56 percent based on 6-year graduation rates at baccalaureate institutions. That figure goes up to 58 percent if we include transfer students. In 2003, 30 percent of Ohioans had attained an associate degree or higher. Laudable as that it is, it is nowhere near the 80 percent levels of postsecondary attainment which our citizens will need to become economically self-sufficient, according to McCabe.

If these projections of economic sustainability and educational attainment are correct, Ohio must educate almost three times as many more Ohioans at the postsecondary level than we historically have accomplished! It is a task of worthy of Sisyphus, especially as it occurs concurrently with a shift in the economic base of our state where many manufacturing jobs have been lost and new jobs are appearing disproportionately in the service sectors at much lower pay. Unless the cost structure for delivering higher education changes, or taxes are increased, which the current General Assembly is loath to do, it is difficult to see clearly how this massive shift in educational attainment and student success will occur in Ohio or anywhere else.

As is elucidated clearly in these papers, the key task of educational policymakers of our generation is to learn how to increase the graduation rate of current cohorts of college students, while at the same time, vastly increasing the numbers and diversity of students who matriculate in the first place. And of those who matriculate, many will have lower levels of academic preparation than previous cohorts.

We will need to consider, disseminate, and implement the best practices and recommendations offered in the research presented in these papers. We also may be faced with a need to develop an entirely new business model or operating system in order to shift from one out of three Americans successfully completing postsecondary education into a new reality in which four out of five of our fellow citizens attain associate degrees or higher.

If Friedman's[3] projections of a flat world are correct, the success of the American economy and the economic competitiveness of the American worker will depend greatly on the ability of Americans to achieve postsecondary educational success. Furthermore, American businesses are insistent that a key competitive edge lies in so-called soft skills, not just content mastery. Teamwork, the capacity to innovate, the ability to access knowledge that has not yet been discovered, as well as multicultural proficiency and communications skills are prized attributes of today's and tomorrow's global talent pool. These are the measures of success in the business world in which these students will work.

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[3] Friedman, T. L. (2005). *The world is flat: A brief history of the Twenty-first Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

The authors of these papers very aptly point out that student success is a result of many factors throughout the K-16 educational system. For example, success can also be defined by postcollege outcomes in the employment arena. Yet, another challenge facing us is the preponderance of turf battles and funding silos that begin with the very construct of the legislative committee structure, carried through to the executive agencies at the federal and state levels, and finally down to the school district and community levels.

Policymakers and education leaders alike must be able to look to the constituency that matters most—in George Bernard Shaw's words, "the posterity that has no vote." If we are to accomplish the generational task set before us, that is to take our states and our people into never achieved levels of educational success, we must be willing to step beyond our narrow interests and short-term mindsets. It truly does begin with us.

As these scholars assert, we already know much of what needs to be done to assure student success. But they also ask if we have the political will. For example, they advise us that institutional climate and a system of encouraging standards of excellence in teaching can be catalysts in fostering and rewarding such skills as well as other indicators of student success.

Do we have the will to make the cultural shifts in our expectations of faculty, to radically support articulation with 2-year colleges and with private and proprietary institutions? Do we see it as our responsibility in academe, in the legislatures, and in the boardrooms to insist on shared accountability and mutual rewards throughout the K-16 continuum?

And finally, the sad truth is that many students in their families simply don't know what they don't know. As Sojourner Truth said so poignantly as she looked back on her life, "I freed many slaves. I could have freed many more if they had known they were slaves."

Many of today's K-12 students do not have a vision of the possible future they could have because there are few guideposts in their current environments. Might career counseling and aptitude testing throughout the K-16 continuum become adjuncts for student success and persistence? If we are successful in extending postsecondary education to reach a larger population of students, many of these students will be the first generation of their family to enter college. They will have few in their families who can provide the context and understanding for the college experience. This will need to come from education and the community. One model that is working well in Ohio is the Ohio College Access

Network. Another is the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) program.

As a business person privileged to serve on the Ohio Board of Regents, I mark success with one clear cut measurement—the increase in the number of Ohioans who have access, aspiration, academic preparation, affordability, and success in reaching a much higher level of educational attainment than was ever envisioned by themselves or by their elected and appointed leaders in the past.

I am grateful for the insights of the scholars who contributed to the papers that form the foundation of this discussion.   I look forward to the insights of my colleagues on the panel and those in the audience. I firmly believe that none of us has all the answers. But I am equally confident that it is through rigorous scholarship combined with strategic conversations such as this that we can develop the collective intelligence to create the future we desire and one the next generation deserves.

So let me turn now to comment on the specific observations and recommendations addressed by each of the scholars whose research provides a focus for this panel.

Defining Student Success

John Braxton makes a very good point when he states that, "…college student success stands as a topic that cries out for some form of systematic empirical attention. Without the benefit of such scholarly attention, uninformed, ad hoc views on student success and ways to achieve it will emerge."

Clearly, state legislators who feel hard pressed to augment funding for higher education are looking for easy short cuts to assess the educational return on investment, primarily as a means of gauging student success in terms of economic impact. The basic belief among policymakers outside of academe is that higher education must be held accountable for producing quality and results. An easy solution, albeit of questionable effectiveness, is the call for standardized testing being proposed by some at the national level.

Braxton acknowledges that the meaning of student success goes well beyond the indicators of student retention and graduation. In fact, he delineated eight domains that offer additional clarity to such a definition.

His recommendations to more tightly align funding policies with performance goals for student learning and to reward teaching excellence would certainly meet with warm enthusiasm from business leaders and legislators who are fully familiar with pay-for-performance systems. But again, these leaders will continue to seek the documentation of the economic impact of such educational achievement at the individual, regional, and state levels.

Reducing the College Success Gap and Promoting Success for All

Laura Perna and Scott Thomas offer a proposed conceptual model to create, implement, and assess racial/ethnic and socioeconomic gaps in student success. Their model is based on the examination of 10 indicators of student success across a longitudinal spectrum from precollege readiness to postcollege attainment.

They coherently summarize a number of the factors that thoughtful policymakers have acknowledged as important ingredients in student success in college. These include aspiration, academic preparation, access, and achievement. Of course, affordability is also a key component and one that is frequently singled out by policymakers as tuition levels continue to rise.

Most policymakers would wholeheartedly agree with their central thesis that student success is a longitudinal process. A key observation they offer is "Typically, policies and programs are developed in isolation, with little coordination among them, and are designed to address discrete indicators of student success." From the federal level to the state level, the policies affecting the longitudinal spectrum of student success are often developed in silos of legislation, administration, and funding.

For example, which legislative committee chair or agency head would be willing to give up his or her turf in order to create a comprehensive educational policy that would span K-16 and the workforce? Perhaps ultimately, it will take that kind of selfless and visionary leadership among federal and state legislators and agency heads to set the example for educational administrators and boards of trustees at the local level.

In the meantime, the good points raised in this paper lead me to ponder how and when it could be possible for policymakers to align the accountability measures and rewards for longitudinal collaboration across educational systems. This alignment will produce the optimal levels of student success for all, while taking into account the diversity of racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, generational, and educational preparedness qualities of the student population.

A Review of the Literature on Student Success

After clearly identifying the questions that guided the authors' inquiry into the literature on student success, Kuh et al. categorized four key areas of research findings. They are (1) student background and precollege experiences, (2) student postsecondary engagement, (3) postsecondary institutional conditions, and (4) postcollege indicators of success.

As indicated by the conclusions reached in other papers, these authors found that the seeds of academic success in college are sown long before students arrive on campus. They have found that the most important element for success is rigorous academic preparation in elementary and secondary school.

The authors' recommendations on strengthening the high school core curriculum and making it the "default" curriculum for most students have previously been advocated by Governor Taft in Ohio as well as policymakers in other states who recognize the central importance of the keys to academic success. The recommendation to "instill in K-12 educators an assets-based talent development philosophy about teaching, learning, and student success," is sound and warrants further development on how this could be implemented by higher education at the pre-service level and linked to pay-for-performance at the school district level.

The recommendation to recognize and reinforce the importance of family and community support is another key tenet that is being implemented in Ohio through the Ohio College Access Network, whereby community volunteers educate families and students on college access and affordability and help students to obtain the funding needed for college attendance.

If policymakers are to be successful in encouraging the aspirations and broadening the context for students from underrepresented groups, and "massifying" the success of four out of five high school-aged students in postsecondary education, then it is critically important to develop and implement consistent career awareness and aptitude assessments for students throughout the K-16 continuum. In Ohio, there are major corporations with comprehensive employee talent assessment and development that have offered to partner with government in pilot testing such instruments for use in schools.

In addition, through the statewide college access network of organizations and institutions, the Ohio Board of Regents is developing a web-based portal for career information. The network also provides information for students and their families on college admissions criteria and financial aid and links to Ohio's public and private colleges and universities.

Finally, in addressing the affordability issue, many policymakers, especially legislators, are dismayed by spiraling tuition increases in Ohio. Some are looking to the voucher or a partial voucher model as one means providing higher education support directly to the consumer, rather than to institutions.

Moving From Theory to Action: Building a Model of Institutional Action for Student Success

Tinto and Pusser eloquently and persuasively point out the need for policymakers to craft linked strategies across the K-16 continuum when developing policies to support student success. They stress the highly individualized context that supports academic success, including demographics, culture, available resources, and existing policies, as well as the opportunity policymakers have to shape some of these contexts.

I very much concur with their recommendations, which advocate clarity in articulating the goals and strategies of student success and legitimacy and inclusivity in considering the perspectives of the students themselves, as well as those of other stakeholders. This is neither a simple nor a neat process, but my experience is that out of such a dialogue, new insights, and commitments are born.

Perhaps such dialogues can be engendered to produce outcomes that will look beyond the short-term tenure of any one legislator, Regent, or university president. Perhaps we really do have more collective power than we allow ourselves to admit.

Holland's Theory and Patterns of College Student Success

This paper offers a refreshing and practical perspective on the association between student success in postsecondary education and the connection of the educational experience with the innate personalities, interests, and abilities of the students. Smart et al. suggest that the congruence between students and their academic environments is related to higher levels of educational success as defined by student learning.

The approach Holland suggests is not predicated on students' past or present personality profiles, but "focuses the advice given students on what they hope to be rather than what they presently are." The advice to policymakers and educational leaders is to focus student success assessment efforts at the level of academic environments as well as in students' academic majors.

They urge authenticity in assessing whether students are in fact successfully demonstrating the interests, abilities, and values that the respective academic environments seek to reinforce and reward when their students enter their programs. The theory is intriguing; I would be interested in exploring a further articulation of how this could be implemented in educational policy.

Conclusion

In summary, I would suggest that there is a single greatest systemic challenge to student success as measured by the diversity of indicators brought forth in these papers. In my view, this challenge is identifying and repairing the fragmentation and lack of coherency among the many parts of the K-16 continuum.

These papers correctly recommend that rewards be tied to performance; perhaps the time is right to begin exploring shared performance measures and rewards on a systemic basis. If a third grade teacher is educating youngsters who all read at the third grade level, then this may have a positive impact on remediation rates at the local community college when those youngsters enroll. Why not reward both accordingly?

Finally, backed by solid research and on-the-ground examples of practical results, in the end it will require visionary and courageous leadership to achieve historic levels of student success across the American social and educational landscape.

Perhaps such leaders could begin by convening the educational stakeholders in their communities and initiating an authentic dialogue around at least three core questions:

- What do you truly need (versus want) in order to achieve student success?

- Of what are you willing to let go?

- For what are you willing to be held accountable that contributes to the health of the entire system?

If reforms leading to massive increases in postsecondary attainment and success are not initiated from within the system, I have no doubt that policymakers in state and national legislatures and executive offices will begin to attempt to create those reforms from without.