

What Matters to Student Success: A Review of the Literature

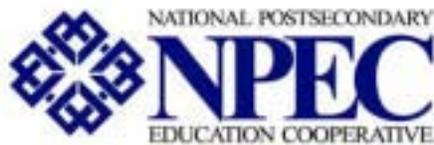
Executive Summary

Commissioned Report for the National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success: Spearheading a Dialog on Student Success

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Creating the conditions that foster student success in college has never been more important. Four-fifths of high school graduates need some form of postsecondary education (McCabe, 2000) to prepare them to live an economically self-sufficient life and to deal with the increasingly complex social, political, and cultural issues they will face. Unfortunately, members of some of the fastest growing segments of the U.S. population 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 those of 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, attainment of educational objectives, and postcollege performance.

The following questions guided our review of the literature:

- What are the major studies that represent the best work in the area?
- What are the major conclusions from these studies?
- What key questions remain unanswered?
- What are the most promising interventions prior to college (such as middle school, high school, bridge programs) and during college (such as safety nets, early warning systems, intrusive advising, required courses, effective teaching and learning approaches)?
- Where is more research needed and about which groups of students do we especially need to know more?
- How does the work in this area inform a theory about student success?

First, we summarize the major theoretical perspectives on student success in college: sociological, organizational, psychological, cultural, and economic. Then, we synthesize the major research findings related to four key areas: (a) students' background and precollege experiences, (b) students' postsecondary activities emphasizing engagement in educationally purposeful activities, (c) postsecondary institutional conditions that foster student success, and (d) the desired outcomes of college and postcollege indicators of success. Our analysis leads us to seven propositions about student success.

We offer recommendations for action to address each of the propositions and identify areas where more research is welcome.

Propositions and Recommendations

1. 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.

2. Family and community support are indispensable to a student’s raising 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 students to become college prepared. Also essential are effective school-community partnerships with well-designed college encouragement and readiness programs such as GEAR UP and Indiana’s Twenty-First Century Scholars Program.

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 aid availability.

3. The right amount and kind of money matter 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 critical factor that determines whether students and their families believe college is within reach and worth making the effort to prepare for academically. The perceived and—in many

cases—the actual cost of college are major impediments to becoming college ready and seeking college admission for many historically underserved students.

Recommendations:

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

4. 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, particularly those from lower income levels, are especially prone to struggle academically and socially. 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, such as being the first in the family to go to college and/or being from a low-income background.
- Provide multiple learning support networks, early warning systems, and safety nets.

5. 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, or develop a meaningful relationship with one of 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.

6. 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. These include such activities 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 assets-based talent development philosophy about teaching, learning, and student success.
- Use effective educational practices throughout the institution.
- Use technology in educationally effective ways.
- Provide incentives for institutions to identify and ameliorate debilitating cultural properties.

7. Because we value what we measure, 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 to 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.
- 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 learn more about the following issues:

- Effective approaches for encouraging different types of students (e.g., first-generation, low income, students of color) to participate in and benefit from postsecondary encouragement programs.

- Effective ways for colleges and universities to inform high schools about their graduates' college performance and *use* the information to improve.
- Effective uses of financial aid to encourage student preparation for college and to make college affordable for students who need financial support to attend.
- What postsecondary institutions can realistically do and at what cost to help academically underprepared students overcome the deficiencies they bring with them to college.
- Approaches to learning (e.g., active learning, electronic technology) that foster success of different groups of students (academically underprepared, low income, first generation, ethnic minorities, immigrants, men) at different types of institutions (2-year and 4-year colleges, public and private schools, for-profit institutions).
- Responsible ways to accurately measure, report, and use student success indicators for purposes of accountability and improvement.

Conclusion

Who students are, what they do prior to starting their postsecondary education, and where and how they attend college all can make a difference in their chances for obtaining a baccalaureate degree or another postsecondary credential. Postsecondary institutions are limited in terms of what they can do to encourage student success. They 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 the 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 are doing at present and implement interventions that will 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 in order to increase the odds that more students "get ready," "get in," and "get through."