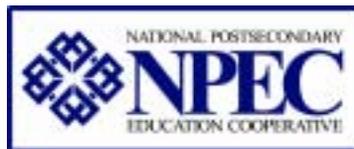




Student Success and Faculty Investment

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STUDENT SUCCESS AND FACULTY INVESTMENT

Taken together, the five papers commissioned for this symposium¹ make a strong case for rethinking—and more strategically addressing—what is clearly one of our nation’s most pressing challenges: increasing the number and range of young people who successfully pursue education and training beyond high school.

Their findings point up serious shortcomings in current approaches to improving postsecondary access and success, and underscore the need for:

- Greater recognition of the enormous scope and complexity of the task at hand;
- Deeper and more widely shared understanding of what constitutes—and what contributes to—postsecondary success;
- Stronger, more dynamic connections between research, policy, and practice; and
- More purposeful, coordinated action at the national, state, and institutional levels. (Here lies the key to what is missing.)

A central problem for these researchers is how narrowly we continue to define and measure “student success,” which, as several of the papers note, extends well beyond the two traditional markers: persistence and graduation.

Perna and Thomas’ analysis of this issue is particularly cogent and useful. They depict student success as a multilayered, longitudinal process comprising college readiness (as measured by educational aspirations and academic preparation), college enrollment (access and choice), college achievement (academic achievement, transfer, and persistence), and post-college attainment (income, graduate/professional school enrollment, etc.). These four interrelated components of student success, Perna and Thomas say, should be considered, studied, and addressed more systematically—and collaboratively—in policy, practice, and research.

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*.

Unfortunately, Perna and Thomas do not provide models of successful approaches to the multi-layered longitudinal process. They do not go far enough in their analysis to demonstrate how the approach can be transferred among the university's departments, although they, as well as the other researchers, realize that a department or a group of faculty working in isolation cannot and will not be able to change the outcomes.

A recurring theme in these papers is the futility of piecemeal, one-size-fits-all approaches that fail to take into account the multiple factors and contexts that shape students' decisions, behaviors, and chances of success. Another is the urgent need to expand, and at the same time make better use of, the knowledge base on improving postsecondary access and success.

Tinto and Pusser, for instance, identify a number of issues we still know too little about, ranging from how best to address the financial and academic needs of students to the impact of institutions' increasing reliance on part-time faculty, particularly during students' critical first year of college. While they name particular issues that have a dramatic impact on student success, this analysis stops short. It is more a list of issues. For example, if the increasing reliance on part-time faculty is a problem in student success, let's dig deeper. Who chooses the part-time faculty? What criteria should be used for their selection? Do part-time faculty and graduate student assistants have different effects on student success? If the motive behind the extensive use of part-time faculty is financial, how can that be modified—office hours? Non-tenured contracts? mentoring of new part-timers?

But while there is still much to learn, Tinto and Pusser say, “we already have a good sense of ‘what works,’ and enough evidence to begin guiding institutional, state and national action on behalf of student success. The issue is not so much lack of knowledge as it is our failure to build upon and extend partnerships between institutions and policymakers on behalf the students we serve.” If we know what works well, how do we communicate specifically to legislators how to invest the university's dollars? Do we need specific earmarks so that institutions invest their dollars for corrective measures?

Kuh et al. agree: “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 establish good policies and practices in order to increase the odds that more students ‘get ready,’ ‘get in’ and ‘get through.’”

It is increasingly clear, Kuh et al. point out, that the trajectory for academic success in college is established long before students matriculate; that family and community support are indispensable in raising a student's educational aspirations, becoming college-prepared, and persisting in

college; and that postsecondary institutions “are limited in terms of what they can do to encourage student success; they cannot change the lineage of their students.”

Kuh is correct in stating that the problems students have are not necessarily the cause of their difficulties in college. But then, how can higher education institutions provide early intervention in the K–12 system? There are successful models of dual enrollment and summer bridge programs. Researchers need to delve into these models to understand what and where they make a difference. And if research is available, as Tinto and Pusser state, how can this information help reshape the colleges of education? This information could help future teachers better align K–12 and higher education. But just this last idea will require major changes in the delivery of education, the setting of standards, and the measuring of student learning and classroom instruction.

But, Kuh et al. contend, as do Tinto and Pusser, institutions can and should be doing far more to help academically unprepared students overcome the deficiencies they bring with them to college. Four-year colleges and universities, in particular, should give greater attention and effort to developing programs, services, and experiences that actively engage students and foster academic and social integration: first-year seminars, effective academic advising, peer mentoring, advising and counseling, summer bridge programs, undergraduate research programs, and technology-enhanced learning. (It’s worth noting that community colleges have considerably more experience and a much better track record than 4-year institutions in terms of creating and sustaining “student-centered cultures.”)

Braxton’s paper focuses on how—and the extent to which—individual faculty members’ teaching performance contributes to student learning. He calls attention to the need for policies and practices at both the state and institutional level that recognize, reward, and support aspects of faculty teaching performance that contribute to student learning—particularly those that “require some degree of effort.”

As an example, candidates for faculty appointments should be required to present a teaching demonstration of pedagogical colloquium as part of the on-campus interview process. Such a policy shows the importance a college or university accords teaching, Braxton says. He also recommends that teaching performance be given greater weight in personnel decisions (salary increases, reappointment, tenure, and promotion). Let us applaud Braxton for daring to state that a way of involving faculty is by rewarding good teaching! But how do we bring about institutional change to carry out this recommendation? Faculty senates and unions have to be visible in the process. Examples would be

helpful here in order to encourage change. In many higher education settings, this kind of change is not always welcome.

Finally, Tinto and Pusser provide a useful list of the areas in which state and national policies should focus in order to have the greatest impact on student success:

- Aligning elementary and secondary school standards with postsecondary requirements;
- Creating databases that can track students through all levels of the education system;
- Enhancing teacher professional development in the K–12 system;
- Creating outreach programs for traditionally underrepresented students;
- Providing stronger and more versatile support for academically struggling students;
- Improving course articulation between 2- and 4-year institutions;
- Assessing students' preparation for college early and continuously; and
- Developing innovative finance policies to increase both overall support and direct aid to the students with greatest financial need.

These are all good recommendations from the researchers, but the practitioners need specific examples to begin to change the environment. Legislators and governors want to know what the result will be if they provide support for developmental programs. There is a need for accountability that is not clearly discussed in these documents.

A last observation: All researchers have approached the discussion from an academic perspective. There is almost no discussion of the role of student services in ensuring student success. In many higher education institutions, particularly in community colleges, the work done by student service personnel, even before the student is admitted to the university, remains unsung. The policymakers seldom recognize the work of student services through state funding mechanisms. California, for example, almost discourages funds for student services. It is only in settings where the college and secondary system work early on in setting goals for students, assessing learning, encouraging exploration of higher education, facilitating financial aid, and finally introducing students to the postsecondary experience that one can observe students not just persisting, but actually flourishing. If it takes a village to educate a child, then it takes the educational village (K–12, higher education, policymakers, parents) to make that education a successful experience for the student. Ideas presented in these papers are not new.

What astonishes this reviewer is that if we know all this and more about student success, why haven't we seen more progress? Can we afford to discuss, catalog, identify, and still not act?