



**FREE
REPORT**

Beyond the Hype: An Inside Look at Student Success

Educators have always wanted students to do well — and then left that more or less up to them. But in the last dozen years, the onus has shifted onto colleges, as a movement called student success has made greater completion rates, equity, and social mobility institutional responsibilities.

Higher education has perhaps never raised a banner so high. Yet the national fervor belies an uncomfortable truth: Improving student success is hard, and many campuses are struggling. Pursuing important goals under pressure, campus leaders don't want to admit that progress is elusive.

How did this movement arise? Several factors converged: Decades of research on how to engage students met a national call for accountability, as federal officials pushed assessment, accreditors demanded data, and states attached money to colleges' outcomes. President Obama set a bar for postsecondary attainment, and foundations

devoted hundreds of millions of dollars to propel colleges into action. Low graduation rates drew new shame, as advocates pointed to barriers like remedial education as a bridge to nowhere.

Meanwhile, enrollment has diversified. Students from historically underrepresented groups are more likely to go to college than before. And a wave of demographic change is bringing to campuses more Hispanic students and fewer recent high-school graduates over all.

For many institutions, retaining more students has become both a moral and financial imperative. It means not only increased state funding but also enough tuition revenue to balance the budget. Still, raising the average retention rate isn't enough if low-income and minority students lag behind.

To get results, campus leaders have invested in student services and academic supports. They've hired student-success specialists, deans of student success, and

THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education

assistant vice presidents for strategic student-success initiatives.

In recent years the buzz has only intensified. A proliferation of groups promote student success — Achieving the Dream, Complete College America, the University Innovation Alliance, and Yes We Must, to name a few — and the big higher-education associations have taken up the cause. Reports and conferences hailing solutions crowd desks and calendars. The burgeoning ed-tech industry promises silver bullets to motivate students and dashboards to monitor every metric.

And take Georgia State. The previously little-known regional public university has proved that progress is possible. Through a comprehensive approach driven by data, so-called intrusive advising, and small, just-in-time retention grants, it has increased its graduation rate by 23 percentage points in 15 years; eliminated racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities; and become a poster child for the movement.

Other campuses have also posted significant gains, among them Arizona State University, the University of South Florida, and Sam Houston State University. Those stories put pressure on peer institutions to shake off mediocrity and recognize the potential of all students.

The common mantra is to move the needle, but sometimes it gets stuck. While student-success courses or summer bridge programs may help orient newcomers, such moves are often too small. Many efforts don't make it past the pilot phase. Grants run out, point people leave. Plenty of institutions run into technical issues collecting data or deploy tools that underdeliver. Some campuses have tried several things, including touted tactics that worked elsewhere, without seeing much impact.

National completion rates are inching up but still haven't cracked 60 percent over all. And some credentials and degrees don't help graduates earn a living. Disparities by race, ethnicity, and income persist. Of the 11 institutions in the University Innovation Alliance dedicated to closing achievement gaps, only two (Georgia State and the University of California at Riverside) have pulled it off so far. What does that mean for campuses without the same commitment of resources?

The student-success movement is at a turning point between rhetoric and reality. The problem is vast and complex, the work consuming and slow. But colleges are reclaiming an agenda initially influenced more by advocates and finding their own paths to change. Community colleges and regional public universities have been at the forefront, trying to make success as much a priority as access, while more selective institutions are seeking to diversify their student bodies and ensure equitable outcomes.

Promoting access to higher education is grounded in the belief that everyone should get a shot at college. The underlying principle of student success is that everyone should be able to graduate. The old saw “Look to your left, look to your right” reinterpreted for today isn't that one student won't make it but that all of them can.

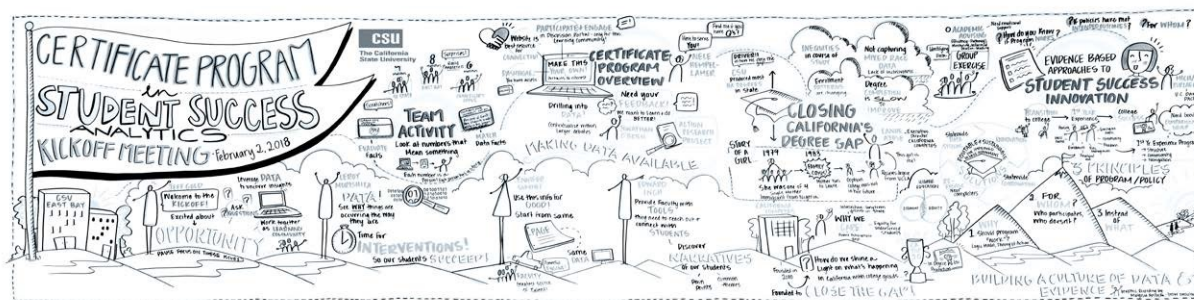
That includes the 18-year-old who gets a bus to high school and a free lunch there, but doesn't have the same deal a few months later at the local college. And the academically unprepared single parent working two jobs. Many students have a lot to overcome. Colleges are trying to piece together the scaffolding to support them, or at least not stand in their way.

How long will higher education sustain attention to student success? With the financial future and public credibility of so many institutions at stake, it can't be a fad. National concerns about social and racial inequality have only strengthened educators' commitment to the cause. If more students succeed, then college is still an engine of opportunity.

But there are no quick fixes to raise retention and graduation rates. Rather than fixate on particular programs or tools, campus leaders should take a step back and tackle broader issues like effective teaching and developing the capacity to collect, analyze, and apply student data. An institution truly grappling with student success will discover that it needs to change the way it's always done things.

On the following pages you will find sample profiles from each of four categories representing the main fronts in student success: applying data, improving the educational experience, integrating academic support, and promoting well-being.

Help the Faculty Apply Student Data



Officials at the California State U. system developed this illustration for a faculty training session on using data to help students succeed.

CSU

THE CHALLENGE

Encourage faculty members to use data to engage students.

THE APPROACH

Create a professional-development program to train the faculty to apply predictive analytics to learning.

THE RESULT

In three years, retention and graduation rates have both increased by several percentage points.

AS PART of a push to raise graduation rates by 2025, the California State University system is putting data directly in the hands of the faculty.

Professors across the system have access to an online dashboard showing student data broken down by campus. The dashboard also allows professors to see achievement gaps in their own courses and track how long it takes their students to graduate.

“Our goal is to not just to show data that make people say, ‘Oh, that’s interesting,’” says Jeff Gold, assistant vice chancellor for student-success strategic initiatives. To help translate data into action, Cal State started the Student Success Analytics Certificate Program in 2018 on two campuses, Cal State-East Bay and San Francisco State University. Teams of about 20 faculty and staff members met biweekly for two hours over three months. Aside from in-person meetings to kick off and conclude the program, all sessions were held online.

Although the program provided some training on the dashboard, its chief focus was how participants could use data to support experimentation. Each group submitted a list of proposed projects, which included an analysis of strategies to im-

prove success rates for African-American students and a comparison of nonpassing grades for certain courses online versus in-person.

“They had to apply the data to something meaningful,” Gold says.

Early results are promising, he says: Both campuses’ groups submitted proposals for changes in pedagogy and student-support infrastructure that could improve grades, retention, time to graduation, and other measures.

The pilot project was backed by a \$484,000 grant from the Stupski Foundation, a philanthropic group serving San Francisco and Hawaii. The Cal State system began rolling out the program on eight more campuses in late 2018. The system picks up travel costs for in-person meetings, but each campus decides how, or whether, to incentivize faculty participation. Some offer stipends, but most rely on personal motivation and interest in analytics, Gold says.

The system has also created awards to recognize faculty leadership in improving student success, and that has helped generate buy-in, says James Minor, senior strategist for academic success and inclusive excellence at Cal State.

Get Students Across the Finish Line

THE CHALLENGE

Support students near graduation through that final stretch.

THE APPROACH

Create “graduation specialist” positions focused solely on barriers to graduation.

THE RESULT

The university’s four-year graduation rate has risen almost four percentage points since the program started.

WHEN Indiana State University’s retention rate slipped by nearly 6 percentage points in 2010, the institution sharpened its focus on student success. Administrators explored ways to help new students, while considering how to propel more juniors and seniors to the finish. The university’s four-year graduation rate had hovered around 20 percent for at least a decade.

About half of Indiana State’s students are first-generation, and about two-thirds receive financial aid. After examining data and talking with advisers, administrators identified common challenges juniors and seniors were facing, such as scheduling problems and financial barriers, says Joshua Powers, associate vice president for student success.

Inspired by a program at California State University at Fullerton, Indiana State created a “graduation specialist” role in the 2015-16 academic year. Christina Cantrell, the first one, was quickly able to see a lot of “balls being dropped,” she says, like prerequisites not being offered. Or students didn’t know where to get help with course planning and felt abandoned.

She encountered pushback at first, she says: “It was hard to get buy-in,” especially from academic advisers, and from faculty members who felt like she was meddling.

The university now employs three graduation specialists, who pore over student records, trying to catch gaps in degree progress or other inconsistencies, and act as a one-stop shop for students’ questions. They also contact students who have left without finishing their degrees.

The specialists cross-train with the uni-

versity’s financial-aid office. Scholarships can depend on students’ earning a certain number of credit hours each semester or year, and for students who work, those targets can be difficult to achieve. The specialists are a first contact for students struggling to maintain their scholarships, and the university has reserved aid for students whose credit hours fall just short.



JONATHAN GARCIA, INDIANA STATE U.

Indiana State U. has created a new role, the “graduation specialist,” to help students plan their classes and overcome obstacles to getting a degree.

Indiana State’s four-year graduation rate has risen almost four percentage points since 2016, continuing an upward trend in the past several years. While the jump cannot be attributed solely to the specialists, their role has been an important factor, Powers says.

Cantrell often hears from graduates who may not have earned their degrees without that additional support in the home stretch. “I get lots of emails from students just thanking me for giving them, you know, a little bit of extra time,” she says.

Let Students Explore Without Wasting Credits

THE CHALLENGE

Increase the graduation rate and reduce time to degree.

THE APPROACH

Create nine “meta-majors” that let students explore an area of study before choosing a specific major.

THE RESULT

Students are taking fewer unnecessary courses, and the graduation rate has risen by 15 percentage points.

In 2011, student success at Lorain County Community College looked bleak: The retention rate was below 60 percent, and the three-year graduation rate stood at 8 percent.

“We had to challenge ourselves to ask: Do our students deserve more?” says Marcia Ballinger, president of the college, in northern Ohio.

It proved to be a pivotal year. The college was awarded a grant as part of the Completion by Design program, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to improve student success at nine institutions.

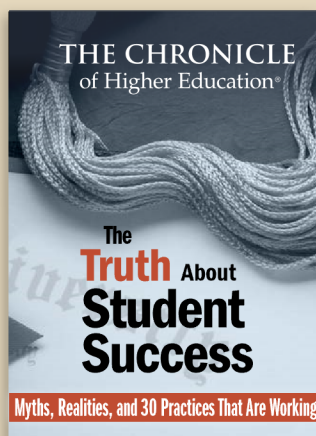
Over the next five years, Lorain embarked on a number of reforms, including an ambitious redesign of its degree tracks. For years it had let students choose, cafeteria-style, from more than 120 majors — and from many disparate courses to fulfill requirements, says Ballinger. In an effort to save students both time and money, the college scrapped that model and instead created degree programs in nine meta-majors, called Program and Career Pathways, such as business and entrepreneurship, education, and health and wellness. The overhaul, which took full effect in the 2015-16 academic year, was influenced by research endorsed

by the Completion by Design program.

Now, new students typically enter a meta-major and start taking core courses. They later pick a specific major within that meta-major.

The model allows students to explore a range of programs under a thematic umbrella without wasting credits or taking unnecessary courses, says Jonathan Dryden, provost and vice president for academic and learner services. For example, 9 percent of accounting students were taking anatomy and physiology, considered a tough course, to fulfill a science requirement. Now they are guided toward science courses more relevant to their major. The model also discourages algebra and subsequent courses unless students need them.

So far the results of all Lorain’s efforts, including the academic overhaul, are promising. In 2017, the three-year graduation rate rose to 23 percent.



About The Chronicle's Full Report

“The Truth About Student Success” offers lessons on where to go from here. It features:

- **Three guiding principles** to jump-start student-success efforts or take them to the next level — and pitfalls to avoid along the way.
- **30 case studies** from campuses across the country that show many different approaches to improve results.

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Develop Meaningful Campus Jobs

IN THE SUMMER of 2011, Clemson University's then-provost, Doris R. Helms, came up with an idea she thought would increase student engagement and improve graduates' employment prospects: offering paid, on-campus, professional internships. She pitched the program to Neil Burton, executive director of Clemson's Center for Career and Professional Development, saying it would be a way for students to try out careers and earn a little income, too.

Burton was sold. "How many are you thinking?" he asked, expecting an answer of 25 or 50, he recalls.

"Five hundred," she replied.

"I was a little taken aback," recalls Burton, whom Helms charged with making her idea a reality. When he estimated that it would cost almost a million dollars to start the program, Helms told him to go bigger. He tripled the request.

Some faculty members and administrators were less enthusiastic. Barely six months earlier, Helms had asked department heads to shave 20 percent from their budgets, and many feared deeper cuts ahead, Burton says.

But the university had made student engagement a key pillar of its strategic plan, and the president's council agreed to the request. The program started the following spring with 20 students, aiming for 500 by 2020.

In 2013, when there were 120 interns, state legislators offered to kick in \$1 million if the program got to 620 interns by 2014. It made the target, hiring 626 students that year.

Today the University Professional Internship and Co-op program, or UPIC, employs close to 1,000 students, who help redesign

campus websites, visit local high schools to discuss college admissions, and perform other campus jobs. There are 20 applicants for every position.

UPIC provides financial incentives to faculty and staff members to create skilled campus jobs for students, covering half of their salaries. It sweetens the deal for employers who hire needier students, covering a full semester's salary for Pell Grant-eligible, first-generation students from South Carolina.

Clemson didn't design its program with equity as a major goal, but Burton says he knows of several low-income students who persisted to graduation because they were paid to work on campus. Of the 299 students in the program's 2012 cohort, 291 — more than 97 percent — graduated within six years.

The program seems to be helping students land jobs, too. In its latest graduate survey, Clemson found that those who participated in UPIC were significantly more likely to be employed full time than those who didn't pursue any form of experiential education — 68 percent versus 46 percent.

THE CHALLENGE

Prepare students from all economic backgrounds for rewarding careers.

THE APPROACH

Create a program offering paid, professional internships in a variety of campus roles.

THE RESULT

Students who participate are more likely than their peers to be employed full time after graduation.



CLEMSON U.

Clemson U. has developed paid internships, including this geomapping project using drones, for hundreds of students.

CREDITS

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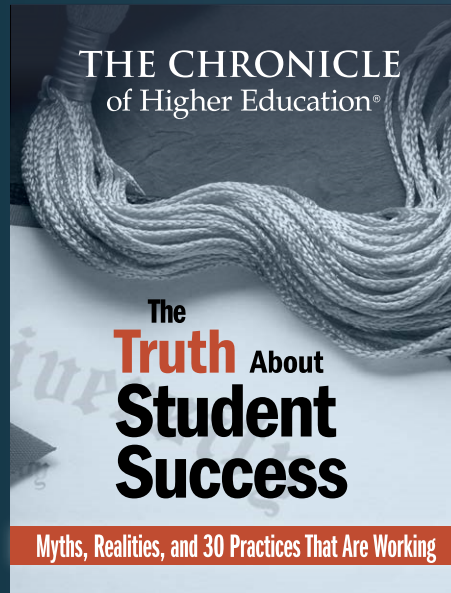
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Buy the Full Report

The student-success movement is at a turning point between rhetoric and reality. Purchase the full report, “The Truth About Student Success: Myths, Realities, and 30 Practices That Are Working,” for insight, strategies, and advice on how to combat the systemic problems that are hindering student success.

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