

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Truth About Student Success

LISSA GOTWALS FOR THE CHRONICLE

Students work on a poster project about their futures at the U. of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Student success is far from straightforward. There are no quick fixes to raise retention and graduation rates. Rather than fixate on particular programs or tool, 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.

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 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.

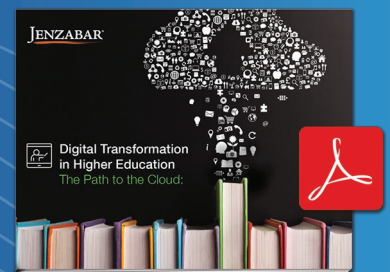
To help colleges jump-start student-success efforts or take them to the next level, and identify pitfalls along the way, *The Chronicle* published “The Truth About Student Success: myths, realities, and 30 practices that are working.” The 58-page report explains how breakthroughs often come from taking a step back from programs and tools to think about broad goals like effective teaching and applying student data. It also offers 30 case studies of colleges around the country that are working to improve results. The following selected highlights from the report look at two of these approaches and how they were implemented on two campuses.

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APPLYING STUDENT DATA

Supporting students starts with understanding them. And they offer many clues, in their backgrounds, academic performance, and behavior. Using that information — demographic factors, grades, even student-ID swipes — to identify broad patterns and individual needs is what's called predictive analytics.

The term is more common than the actual practice, complete with outreach to keep students on track and procedural changes to smooth their path. Many colleges hit technical snags: For example, different offices run separate software. Deploying a new system can be expensive; training people to use it and cultivating buy-in take time, as do questions of privacy and ethics.

But colleges sit on a lot of data, with many entry points to examine students' experience. Six years ago, leaders at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro saw that low-income, first-generation students were a rapidly growing segment of their enrollment. Because those groups traditionally lag behind their peers in retention and graduation rates, the university adopted predictive-analytics software to identify students who may need extra support.

The software groups each new class of freshmen into deciles based on their likelihood of staying enrolled. High-school GPA and demographic factors go into the calculations, along with other, less-intuitive information, like how many miles a student lives from home (homesickness can lead some students to drop out).

The university intervenes in a variety of ways. Advisers reach out directly to some students, while others may take part in activities like Spartan StartUp, a new five-week summer program. In 2018, it provided 42 new students with individualized advising and mentoring while they earned seven course credits.

One key to Greensboro's success is time spent constantly tweaking its predictive-analytics model, says Dana Dunn, provost and executive vice chancellor. Over time, new data points have been added, including students' pre-university work and their country of origin.

The efforts have paid off: In 2016, Greensboro was recognized in a U.S. Department of Education study for enrolling and graduating Pell Grant recipients at a rate nearly the same as for all students. Some 52 percent graduated within six years, compared with 55

percent over all.

Officials are also revamping their outreach strategies. Until recently, a staff member responsible for first-year retention was the primary point of contact for struggling students. "That was less than productive, because students were getting emails from someone they did not recognize," says Samantha Raynor, assistant vice provost for strategic student success. Now the university is putting together a network of student-outreach representatives that will include faculty members and staff members from offices such as advising, student affairs, and athletics. The goal is for students to hear from someone they already know and trust.

While the information gleaned from predictive analytics is helpful, Dunn stresses that it's only one piece of the puzzle. "We think it has some power," she says, "but we're not relying solely on it."

INTEGRATING ACADEMIC SUPPORT

A little extra help can go a long way to raise students' academic performance. The effort could start as early as lifting the ambitions of local children and their parents and encouraging them to prepare for college. Or as late as helping students clear the final hurdles before graduation.

Common approaches center on the transition to college: for example, a bridge program to familiarize new students with campus resources, or a course to teach good study habits. And personalized support comes in different forms: advising, to help students chart a course; tutoring, as closely tied to coursework as possible; mentorship, often by peers who have overcome similar challenges; and coaching, a blend of motivation and guidance.

Making that support accessible, even unavoidable, means reaching more of the students who wouldn't seek it out themselves.

At Southern Utah University, college leaders focused on freshman retention rates, which fell five percentage points in five years. They knew they had a problem. They just weren't sure what to do about it.

The college had tried several "high impact" practices that are supposed to help with retention, but they weren't stemming the slide.

At a loss for solutions, administrators hired a chief retention officer, Jared Tippetts, who had been the director of student success

at Purdue University. Tippetts, whose formal title is vice president for student affairs, started from scratch with his team, building a comprehensive “first-year experience” that focused on fostering a sense of belonging.

The overhaul worked. First-to-second-year retention has risen nearly nine percentage points over three years, reaching 73 percent in 2018. In the process, the college has saved over \$5 million in tuition revenue from students who stayed enrolled.

Under the new approach, advisers and peer mentors reach out to students an average of 38 times from when they pay their admission deposit to when they move in. When students arrive on campus, they’re given a choice between boisterous welcome parties and more intimate gatherings. Peer mentors offer to take students to their first club meeting so they don’t have to go alone.

New students complete a questionnaire that asks about their financial, emotional, and social well-being before the semester starts, and again three weeks in. When a student shows signs of struggle, an adviser, faculty

member, or peer mentor will intervene.

As with most major overhauls, there was some initial pushback. Faculty members, Tippetts says, didn’t always appreciate being told how to help their students. So administrators stopped telling them to send a specific email at a specific time, and started asking them to reach out to students in their own way.

Meanwhile, the college continues to innovate, aiming for a retention rate of 75 percent. To generate new ideas, it hosts a “shark tank” competition, inviting anyone to present a proposal for improving retention to the president’s council. The contest has led to the creation of a peer-mentoring program and the hiring of a “withdrawal coordinator” who looks for ways to keep would-be dropouts enrolled.

Other changes have been driven by data. After surveys showed that students were continuing to leave for financial reasons, the college hired a financial-literacy expert. And when personality assessments revealed an uptick in introverts, it added more small-group sessions to welcome week.



KIM RAFF FOR THE CHRONICLE

Incoming freshmen and their parents can visit with current students at Southern Utah U.

“Welcome weeks are notoriously programmed for extroverts,” Tippetts said. “A lot of our students struggle in those environments.”

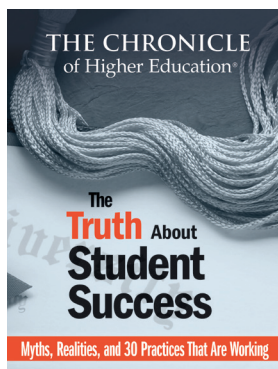
BEYOND THE BUZZ

The student-success movement has generated plenty of buzz, and now it is working to sustain momentum and show impact.

The pressure to improve student success creates a fixation on solutions, but best practices aren’t quick fixes. As a long-term investment, creating a program or a tool may not prove as sound as shoring up a system. Breakthroughs

can come from reviewing all processes, even diagramming how the college operates, from the perspective of the student. Reorienting an institution toward students calls for putting their success over rankings or research.

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.



The Chronicle's latest deep-dive report, “The Truth About Student Success,” will give readers the insights and guidance they need to help students thrive.

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