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## A Plan for Facilitating Undergraduate Student Success

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## [A Plan for Facilitating Undergraduate Student Success](#)

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Students are successful when they achieve their maximum potential and are well prepared to become transformative leaders in their chosen fields of study. Easier conceptualized than accomplished, this success is the result of a complex combination of factors and an outgrowth of quality instruction, opportunities for personal growth, access to resources, and a culture of connection with classmates, faculty, staff, and the institution. Each of these areas is an imperative ingredient for student success. Together, these components interact to provide the pathway for the greatest number of students to be successful.

A traditional path through college does not exist. Students matriculate and progress through college in every imaginable configuration. Many are non-traditional in age. Often, because of personal circumstance or family responsibilities, they enroll part-time or on specific days or particular times of the day. While some live on campus, others commute. Thus, students pursue their college degrees in a myriad of ways. Similarly, students leave for many reasons. Therefore, university personnel have the ability to impact some, but not all, of the factors that result in students leaving. If we keep doing the same things in the same ways, nothing will change.

Increasing student success requires sustained effort from all directions. It is not the sole responsibility of any single office or person. Results from the Graduation Rates Outcomes Study concludes that “student success is more a product of an overarching shared culture than it is the result of a more narrowly-conceived deliberate ‘retention’ or ‘graduation’ effort” (Hanson, 2006). There is no magic bullet. Therefore, the question is, “How do we go about creating a culture of support for student success?”

What does it take? Hanson (2006) outlined four objectives necessary for change: 1. strong leadership with a clear message that graduation rates can and will improve, 2. involvement of the entire academic ‘village’ to change a graduation rate, 3. understanding why students fail to graduate in a timely manner, and 4. determination of aspects that need to be changed and that can be changed. To meet these goals, it is imperative that a comprehensive, concerted and coordinated effort to support student success be developed. Important factors include analyzing the multiple pathways from matriculation to graduation, identifying the obstacles to student progress and goal attainment, working to remove the identified barriers, and extending opportunities for student growth.

Moreover, efforts to promote student success must involve all stakeholders. Decisions should be driven by input from students, faculty, and staff. Quantitative and qualitative data should inform the development of initiatives and programs. Feasible, measurable goals should be established in

collaboration with all invested parties (students, faculty, and staff), shared with the full university community, and monitored.

The case for connection. To be fully comprehensive, efforts must take a holistic approach by touching the important yet intangible sense of student connectedness with the institution. When the majority of the students are enrolled part-time and do not live on campus, creating meaningful connections is especially challenging. It will not happen accidentally. It is imperative that intentional efforts be made to establish, develop and nurture a “culture of connection”. When students feel connected to their surroundings through relationships with classmates, faculty and staff, they are more likely to choose to persist. Long-term gains will likely be realized since happy students eventually make happy alumni who speak highly of their alma mater and want to give back to their college.

Factors That Impede Student Success

Hansen (2006) has identified the following four speed bumps on the road to graduation.

1. Academic failure

Receiving a “D” or “F” in just one or two courses during the first two years of college dramatically reduces the chances for graduation.

2. The ‘teaching-learning-grading’ process

The teaching-learning-grading process is inconsistent between institutions and contributes to academic failure and lower graduation rates (Hansen, 2006).

3. Lack of financial support

Increasing tuition by \$1,000 reduces the probability of persisting in college by 16% for poor students, by 19% for working class students, by 9% for middle class students, and by 3% for the wealthiest students. A \$1,000 grant reduces first year, low-income student’s probability of dropping out by 23% (Paulsen & St. John, 2002).

4. Lack of knowledge about the ‘college process’

Entering freshmen, transfer students, and first-generation college students are three groups that are unfamiliar with the university milieu. These groups of students are not mutually exclusive and, although they may have different specific needs, each struggles with adjustment to university terminology, regulations and policies.

A Plan for Improving Student Success

If we keep doing the same things in the same ways, nothing will change. A well-conceptualized plan for change will address the following variables. Students will be successful when they are:

	Proposed Response:

Prepared well	Establish and develop links with community colleges and area public schools. Develop programs to identify students who are at risk and provide early intervention and support.
Financed well	Focus on developing scholarship and grant opportunities for students, especially for the summer as there are likely to be fewer scholarship opportunities for this timeframe.
Advised well	<p>Hire and train quality academic advisors.</p> <p>Advisors should develop, implement and oversee support programs for students at risk of academic failure.</p> <p>Advise students to attend summer school at least once.</p>
Taught well	<p>Encourage all undergraduate programs to develop a coherent, well-conceptualized, well-articulated vision for their program.</p> <p>Create and develop a comprehensive support structure for adjunct faculty.</p>
Socialized well	<p>Thoroughly explore the feasibility of cohorts in delivering programs.</p> <p>Establish Freshman Learning Communities (LC) to help ease the transition to university life and facilitate a sense of connection to the institution. Learning communities should be (1) open to all freshmen and transfer students, (2) focused on a central theme related to their intended major, and (3) kept small, consisting of no more than 25 students who attend up to three classes together: a freshman seminar and one or two core courses. As Lynn Gosnell (2000) explains, “. . . learning communities can foster the kind of sociable educational environment where both intellect and friendship are formed.” An LC focused on an aspect of interest will help get students’ college careers get off to a good start.</p> <p>Hold regular events so that students may meet with the administrators, faculty and staff to ask questions, discuss issues and be informed of future plans. Such events are important because:</p> <p>a. These types of activities contribute to the student’s sense of belonging and identification with the college.</p> <p>b. Students will likely enjoy opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· For personal/social engagement and dialogue with other students, college administrators and faculty.</li> <li>· To obtain information specific to their needs (i.e., academic support, professional development opportunities, etc.)</li> <li>· To have a “voice” and the ability to hear from and be heard by college faculty/administration</li> </ul>

To achieve these initiatives, university leaders must provide the necessary resources, space and personnel. A center that is properly supported and staffed should be established. Center personnel will identify systemic barriers to success and develop and implement proposed solutions for students. The center should be strategically located in the heart of campus. The physical location is important in order to provide visibility and centralized access. This office should be under the direction of an Associate Dean or other professional administrator of similar status. Quality leadership will lend credibility to the center and foster the development of an identity as “the place to go when you don’t know where to go.”

Professional support staff would focus on setting realistic, measurable goals for increased retention and graduation rates and set in place the necessary initiatives to reach them. These include, but are not limited to, systematically soliciting input from students, faculty and staff to articulate their roles in developing and supporting the goals, facilitating the development of programs to facilitate student success, and developing a clear plan to articulate initiatives to all stakeholders. In addition, staff would address the need to create, develop, and coordinate communication with and new programs for adjunct faculty. Other responsibilities for the center might include communicating with community colleges and high schools that feed into the institution, advocating for needed program resources, developing student scholarship opportunities and exploring additional grant funding support for student success programs. To the extent possible, on-line resources should be developed as a cost-effective, efficient means of communicating with both internal and external constituencies, i.e.: a web site targeted student groups, high school counselors, and community colleges, electronic student newsletters, mass emails, or interactive on-line student orientation.

Center staff should foster student leadership by (1) mentoring and educating students regarding how to negotiate the college process and to develop self-advocacy skills, (2) establishing collaborative working relationships and initiatives with student organizations and faculty sponsors, and (3) providing information regarding professional conferences and graduate school. Additional annual events to foster students’ sense of connection could be developed and tailored to your campus. Possible examples include:

· An Undergraduate Student Conference for Professional Development. A 1-day conference held on campus for students and faculty. A well-known scholar or dynamic faculty member might provide a keynote address with breakout sessions conducted by faculty, local business or public school personnel, graduate and undergraduate students.

- Student Leadership Seminars focused on the development of leadership skills. Create additional signature events in order to develop a sense of connection to the institution and a culture of student success.
- Summer Institute for Adjunct Faculty. This could address a variety of topics to enhance adjunct faculty’s sense of connection with the institution, such as general university policies and procedures and other specific issues related to college level teaching. Such an institute will support students indirectly as it helps faculty to help students.

Clearly, the over-arching goal of quality higher education must be student-centered in nature with the long-term student impact in mind. In the education “business,” we must address much more than the quantifiable issues. As educators our goals are far more complex: to influence the whole person, to

teach students how to formulate questions and learn for themselves, to develop healthy self-concepts and the ability to critically reason and problem-solve. Comprehensive student-focused communities are necessary to develop independent, self-disciplined, life-long learners. Communities such as these only come about when an intentional, concerted effort is well thought out, well resourced and well implemented.

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