Colleges can improve student success through not only new ideas but also those of pioneers in the field (essay)

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The Emerging Student Majority

Affirming the Student Success Underground

As institutions seek to advance their student success agendas, they should consider the insights of longtime -- yet often overlooked -- veterans in the field.

April 4, 2016

By

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Nearly every college and university in America has refocused its attention on “student success.” Like many institutions, Cleveland State University, where I work, has erected an entire enterprise devoted to this endeavor. We have reorganized ourselves administratively, invested in new staff, updated technology and taken a deep dive into institutional data to ensure we are best positioned to make sure all our students have a high potential to graduate. We have improved as a result.

People outside academe who witness our urgent efforts might justifiably ask, “Why all the fuss? Isn’t student success what you were supposed to be focused on all along?” In truth, the student success agenda is a recognition that higher education has not delivered on its promise to all students. The six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time college students at four-year institutions is less than 60 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Education. For students who are minority, low income and first generation, it is markedly lower.

This newfound attention to student success has created a measure of perplexity within the academy as well from faculty and staff members who, for decades before it was fashionable for their institutions to do so, have considered themselves devoted to assisting students on the margins. These quiet champions generally operated from the premise that their colleges and universities were, at best, apathetic -- and in some cases, hostile -- to the students who were struggling most.

In response, these faculty and staff members served as advisers outside the formal advising structure. They created informal mentoring programs and sometimes intervened with systems on their campuses and off to advocate on behalf of students. One only need to listen to the stories of minority alumni from past decades to understand how these underground interventions operated and to appreciate their significance in helping students succeed.

Today, many of these underground advocates are still at their institutions, and some are still skeptical of their college or university's commitment to students who traditionally have been left behind. Their skepticism is exacerbated by the fact that many generally believe they have not been acknowledged, affirmed or consulted in this overt student success push. In some cases, the opposite has happened: We have discredited their tactics in our rush to embrace new policies and practices as part of our institutions' "legitimate" student success strategies.

As institutions seek to advance and accelerate their student success agendas, it is imperative that they reconcile the efforts of longtime student success pioneers with the emerging practices and data that are informing higher education strategies today.

I have witnessed this tension between old-school guidance and cutting-edge assistance around the issue of credit hours. At Cleveland State University, as at many institutions, we have adopted a strict policy to drive students to take 15 credit hours a semester. The effort comes from compelling evidence that when students fall short of a 15-credit hour, eight-semester schedule, and it takes them longer than four years to graduate, their likelihood of graduating diminishes. In combing through institutional data a couple years ago, we discovered that African-American students were more likely than other students to take fewer than the 15-credit expectation.

One explanation has become apparent: for years, black students were counseled to do just that by a network of underground advisers. Their rationale was simple: time and time again, they had intervened with black students who were struggling because their course schedules were weighted down unnecessarily with math and science courses during their first semesters. Inevitably, students would perform poorly under the pressure, become discouraged and drop out. Convinced that many in the institution's student advising corps were not sensitive to that reality, these informal advisers would quietly encourage students to drop one of their classes, keeping them at full-time status while relieving the pressure to give them a better chance of remaining in good academic standing.

We now know the best solution for students is a course load that keeps them on track to graduate in four years, along with attentive advising, more creative pedagogy and better support systems to increase students' chances of succeeding in introductory math and science courses. However, some old-school advisers have not felt as though we have respectfully responded to their apprehension over whether those improvements are adequately in place. Instead, they too often only receive messages that they are out of compliance with the institution's directive and that, in fact, they're doing students more harm than good. The translation for them is that the administration, in its newfound wisdom, now thinks it knows more than they do from their years of experience about how to help these students succeed.

Similarly, as new insights come our way, we are quick to overlook those who have been articulating them for years. For instance, research in the past few years by David Yeager, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, and others shows how racial and ethnic minorities are hindered more than others from academic success by negative mind-sets that institutional conditions impose on them. It is old news to these underground champions who, without compelling data, were sometimes dismissed as apologists for raising such concerns.

As a consequence of these slights, many underground advisers are not enthusiastic about aligning with institutional directives around student success. Continued progress, however, will require deeper levels of participation and synergy among everyone who touches students' lives across our colleges and universities. If we are not all on the same page -- especially those who are motivated to be engaged -- we will not maximize the opportunity.

Institutions can generate this comprehensive level of collaboration by inventorying such quiet efforts -- past and present -- and acknowledging that they contributed to the success of students in need even before we had offices assigned to do so. Indeed, if they hadn't been doing what they were doing, higher education might have done an even poorer job with underserved students.

In addition, institutions should consider holding information forums on student success that specifically enlist these quiet champions. That would allow the veterans to share insights from which others can learn. It would also provide

an opportunity to share with them new data and best practices that are informing institutional strategies, as well as to identify practical ways to enlist these champions more effectively in the overall student success agenda.

There are no quick fixes or easy answers for the tremendous challenge of eliminating racial and economic disparities in academic performance and persistence. It will take every ounce of innovative thinking and creativity our people can muster -- that which has prevailed quietly in the past and that which we are boldly implementing today. Integration of the two will not occur by happenstance. It will require deliberate acts of leadership.

Bio

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