

# COMPLETING College

RETHINKING INSTITUTIONAL ACTION

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### ■ Reflections on a Framework for Institutional Action

Institutions that ask what they can do to increase student retention will find that there are many possible answers to that question and thus many possible courses of action they can take to achieve that end. Some recommendations are the result of sound research; others are based on anecdotal evidence; and still others are claims made by various organizations, groups, and individuals, including the increasing number of retention consultants who offer the “secret” of student retention. In this book, I have not sought to replicate that universe of possible action or to reiterate the claims of others. Rather, I have attempted to provide a research-based framework for institutional action that argues that whatever actions an institution chooses to take, it must eventually address the four conditions that are known to promote student retention, namely expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement. At the same time, I have identified the major types of action that institutions can take to establish these conditions and the sorts of institutional policies they should pursue to ensure that those actions are successfully implemented over time in ways that endure and scale up.

As readers will have seen, the framework proposed here places the classroom at the center of a student’s educational life and in turn at the center of institutional action for student success. For most institutions, especially those that are nonresidential, the classroom is the one place, perhaps only place, where students meet each other and the faculty and engage in formal learning activities. For the great majority of students, success in college is most directly shaped by their experiences in the classroom. Furthermore, for the many students who attend

part-time or begin college academically underprepared, success in college is measured one course or even one class at a time.

Several implications for institutional action follow. First, all institutions, especially community colleges, must carefully align and sequence their courses and the support services for those courses such that success in one course leads to success in those that follow. The result should be a series of coherent pathways that students can follow to completion of their programs of study in a timely manner. Second, the actions of faculty in the classroom, the skills and knowledge they possess to engage students there, are critical to student success. Third, and in consequence, faculty development must be part and parcel of institutional efforts to promote student retention. Just as colleges must take seriously the task of enhancing student retention and completion, so too must they take seriously the task of enhancing the skills and knowledge that faculty bring into the classroom.

Aside from requiring development activities on the part of faculty, as is the case in some institutions for new faculty, institutions must provide meaningful incentives and rewards for faculty to engage in those activities. To do so, institutions must address several issues. Four-year institutions must address the frequently discussed conflict between teaching and research and provide incentives and rewards for being involved in faculty development efforts. Though teaching and research need not be in conflict, on many campuses they are not given equal weight, either by faculty or by administrators. This is certainly the case in the leading research universities and increasingly so in four-year institutions concerned about their ranking in national ranking systems. Faculty are under ever greater pressure to carry out research and publish, if only for job security. Among two-year institutions, however, the issue is not so much teaching versus research than finding the time to engage in professional development activities. The typical course load is such that few faculty have time for activities beyond the classroom. Rewards and incentives, therefore, must be measured not only in resources but also in time.

### ■ Taking Student Success Seriously: Moving beyond Add-Ons

Many colleges speak of the importance of increasing student retention. Indeed, quite a few invest substantial resources in programs designed to achieve that end. Yet few institutions take student retention seriously. Most treat it as one more item to add to the list of issues to be addressed. They adopt what Parker Palmer calls the “add a course” strategy. Need to address

the issue of diversity? Add a course in diversity studies. Need to address the issue of student retention, in particular that of new students? Add a freshman seminar or perhaps a freshman mentoring program, but leave untouched the essential educational character of student experience. Furthermore, in seeking to address the issue of student retention, too many institutions exhibit what can be referred to as a form of programitis. They invest in many programs in the hope that doing so will somehow translate to sizable gains in retention, that more programs will translate into more gains in retention. While it is true that more programs are better than fewer, the number matters less than where the programs are situated in the educational life of the institution and how they are organized and aligned one to another. Merely investing in retention programs does not mean taking student retention seriously. Added programs have often sat on the margins of institutional life and have done little to change the prevailing character of student educational experience, especially in the classroom, and thus little to address the deeper roots of student attrition. Consequently, most efforts to enhance student retention have had limited impact.

What would it mean for institutions to take student retention seriously? It would mean that institutions would stop tinkering at the margins of institutional life and make enhancing student retention the linchpin about which they organize their activities. They would move beyond the provision of add-on services and establish those educational conditions that promote the retention of all students, in particular in the classroom, the one place most actions have failed to touch. And they would act to align the actions of its various units so that each is directed in the same direction, namely the success of their students, especially during the first year of college.

To retain and graduate their students, institutions must also take seriously the task of faculty development. They must establish, as several institutions have done, required programs to help new faculty acquire the skills and knowledge they need to help their students succeed in the courses they teach—skills and knowledge that are not typical of faculty new to higher education. It is simply unacceptable that faculty in higher education are the only teachers from kindergarten to university who are literally not trained to teach their students.

### ■ Success Does Not Arise by Chance

Student success does not arise by chance. Nor does substantial improvement in institutional rates of student retention and graduation. It is the

result of intentional, structured, and proactive actions and policies directed toward the success of all students. Effective institutions provide a clear template for the actions of all its members: students, faculty, and staff alike. They establish structures within which various parts of the organization relate to each other and together impact student success. They address systematically each of the conditions shaping student success and do so over the full course of student progression through the institution. Finally, they are proactive: they take action to control events shaping student success rather than merely responding to events. Given evidence of effectiveness, they will often require action rather than leave it voluntary.

Not surprisingly, the conditions for student success described in the preceding chapters are no different from those for institutional success. Every institution needs to set clear and high expectations for itself and its members, provide support for its members, assess and provide feedback about their performance, and actively involve its members with others in determining how the institution as a whole should act to meet those expectations. The source of an institution's success, like a student's success, is its ability to learn and improve over time. Effective institutions employ evidence of student experiences and outcomes in their decision-making. They assess their actions and policies, modify them when necessary, carefully align them to the same end, and invest resources over the long term to achieve that end. An institution following such practices may be described as a "learning centered college" (O'Banion 1997) or a "learning paradigm college" (Tagg 2003). In a very real sense an effective institution is as educational of its faculty, staff, and administrators as it is of its students.

Unfortunately, too many decisions are made without evidence of whether one course of action would yield a better outcome than another, or whether an action already taken has produced its intended outcome. It is telling that while institutions will add new programs in the hope that they will increase retention, rarely do they eliminate existing programs. They may talk about the need for data, but often fail to use the data they already have as the basis for institutional change.<sup>1</sup>

### ■ Access without Support Is Not Opportunity

On the surface, America's public commitment to provide access to any individual who seeks a postsecondary education seems to be working. Our system of higher education has one of the highest participation rates in the world. More than 20 million students are currently enrolled in undergrada-

ate study in public and private two- and four-year colleges and universities, an increase of over 44% between 1990 and 2009 (Snyder and Dillow 2010, table 205). The proportion of high-school graduates entering college immediately after high school has increased from about 49% in 1980 to 68% in 2008 (Snyder and Dillow 2010, table 200). As overall enrollments have grown, so too have the number of economically disadvantaged students who attend college (National Center for Education Statistics 2005; Chen and Carroll 2005).

But scratch beneath the surface of this apparent achievement and the news about access and opportunity in American higher education is much more complex and a lot less hopeful. Despite gains in access, the gap between high- and low-income students in college completion remains, especially for four-year degrees.<sup>2</sup> The facts are unavoidable. Although access to higher education has increased, greater equality in the attainment of four-year college degrees has not followed suit. This is the case for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that many low-income students begin higher education without the requisite academic skills to succeed.<sup>3</sup> There is little question that differences in preparation among students continue to challenge our ability to translate the opportunity access to college provides to the attainment of a degree (Adelman 2007; Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin 2005).

Addressing this issue will not be easy. In addition to efforts in elementary, middle, and high school, it will require of states, the federal government, and foundations a substantial and continuing investment in higher education reform, especially in the community colleges of our nation where the problem of academic underpreparedness is most pressing.<sup>4</sup> Just as important, states will have to take seriously their obligation to provide colleges, especially two-year colleges, with adequate support so that they can give their students the academic support they need to succeed. But adequate institutional support, though necessary, will still be insufficient to address the challenges we face. Institutions must also be willing to reconsider how they go about providing academic support for students and institute a range of changes in their practice, especially in their developmental education courses.<sup>5</sup> And they must provide faculty and staff with the support they need to effectively respond to the academic needs of their students.

## ■ The Limits of Institutional Action

There are limits to what institutions can do to increase student retention and completion. A student's decisions to stay or leave, to transfer to

another institution, or to leave higher education altogether are shaped by a variety of forces, not all of which are amenable to institutional action. Even when a student's experiences within an institution are entirely satisfactory, external forces can lead to departure. Clearly, this is more often the case among two- and four-year institutions that serve large numbers of students who commute, work, or attend part-time, in particular those from low-income backgrounds, than it is for residential institutions serving full-time students from more affluent backgrounds. Unlike the latter, for whom college attendance is their sole or principal obligation, most of the former attend college in addition to other obligations that compete for their time and energies. At the same time, more than a few students, in particular but not only in community colleges, enroll with no intent to complete a degree or certificate. Others begin with the often unstated intent of transferring to another institution. Many will do so regardless of their experiences. As a result, institutions serving these students are more limited in their capacity to increase student retention, at least in the short term. Furthermore, one of the challenges they face in implementing effective action is to fine-tune such action to students' lives beyond the campus as they seek to negotiate the pathway to completion.<sup>6</sup>

Gains in retention and completion also depend in part on an institution's existing rates and on how much has already been done to address retention. A campus with low rates of retention and graduation that has yet to invest in systematic actions can reasonably expect a considerable gain in rates, since almost any action will, if properly implemented, yield sizable results. For a campus that has already addressed most of the major forces on campus shaping student success, a ceiling effect may be operative. In this case, additional actions, while desirable, will have more limited impact, and the returns to those actions will likely be smaller.

Recognition of the limits of institutional action also influences the projections or goals institutions set for themselves as they plan their actions. Though expectations should never be set too low, expecting too much of a course of action or assuming that it can be achieved in too short a time may lead people to become disheartened and give up when they should not. Just as student success is best measured one course at a time, so should institutional success be measured by the achievement of reasonable action plans, one at a time, over a longer period of time. The simple fact is that substantial improvements in student success, whether measured by retention, the attainment of particular momentum points, or graduation, take time

and a not inconsequential investment of energy and resources. As noted earlier, the willingness to invest in a long-term process of improvement, one achievable goal at a time, is a necessary condition for improvement in student retention and graduation.

Setting reasonable expectations is especially important when issues of accountability are at stake. Too often external agencies, in particular those in the public sector, expect too much of institutions or are impatient for improvements to occur. The political timetable that shapes expectations is typically shorter than that which would reasonably apply to individual institutions. Nevertheless, to the degree that an institution must attend to those expectations, it is important that they be reasonable and sensitive to what is achievable in different contexts.<sup>7</sup>

## ■ A Call to Action

This book began with a question: What can institutions do to enhance student retention and completion? In answering that question, a range of actions were described that institutions can take to achieve that goal. But knowing what institutions *can* do is not the same as knowing what they *should* do. What set of actions *should* institutions take to enhance student success? It is to this important question that we now turn.

It bears repeating that my recommendations for institutional action do not absolve students of responsibility for their own success. No actions will ensure the success of students who are themselves unwilling to expend the effort needed to succeed in college. By the same token, student effort may prove futile in settings that are not conducive to success. In admitting a student, a college enters into a contract—indeed, takes on a moral obligation—to establish those conditions on campus, especially in the classroom, that enhance the likelihood that students who are willing to expend the effort will succeed.

What then should institutions do if they are serious in their pursuit of increased student retention and graduation? Although the answers to this question will differ according to context, the following actions represent what any institution should do to enhance the likelihood that substantially more of its students will stay and graduate.

- *Institutions should establish a cross-functional team of faculty, support staff, and administrators whose task it is to oversee institutional planning and action for student success.*

Whether under the direction of an individual or of an office authorized to oversee institutional action, the team must represent the key persons and offices within the institution whose involvement is needed to drive systematic action. All voices in the institution whose actions impact student retention and graduation must be represented. It is a matter not simply of representation and the team's legitimacy in the eyes of members of the institution, but of the capacity of the team to work together to guide a campus-wide effort. Though the team can serve a variety of purposes and may take action when and where agreement exists to do so, it should see its role as facilitating the actions of other offices and persons. As noted earlier, faculty and staff will support what they create, not necessarily what others create for them.

- *Institutions should assess student experience and analyze patterns of student progression through the institution.*

Institutions should continually assess student experience, especially in the classroom, and monitor how changes in institutional action impact student experience. They should carry out detailed analyses of student progression that distinguish between patterns of progression of those who complete their programs of study and those who do not, and should do so in ways that describe progression for specific groups of students, especially those who enter underprepared, with major undeclared, from low-income backgrounds, and for differing programs of study. The institution should develop flow models that indicate how different groups of students progress through different programs within the institution and the points along those paths where students' progress is most at risk. Identifying these critical points enables the institution to think in more practical terms about how different institutional actions should be timed and sequenced so as to move students to and beyond them as quickly as possible to degree completion. Such longitudinal tracking and analyses of student progress should be the norm, not exception, of institutional practice.

- *Institutions should invest in long-term program development and ongoing assessment of program and institutional functioning.*

Institutions should invest in forms of practice that enhance student success, in particular those that impact success within the classroom. Funding should be provided for a period of at least three years in order to allow programs to move beyond the start-up stage, and should carry with it the proviso that funded programs assess themselves, demonstrate their effec-

tiveness, and share the results of their work with the campus community. The goal of investment should be to establish programs that are not only effective, but also able to be sustained and scaled-up over time.

- *Institutions should coherently align institutional actions one to another and to the key progression points identified by its analysis of institutional data.*

Having identified the key points of attainment, institutions should align their actions to create a longitudinal series of actions whose common goal is to enable differing students to successfully navigate the various stages of attainment to degree completion. Institutional actions should serve to enhance the likelihood that students will complete their courses and their differing stages of attainment, one course and one stage at a time. They should result in a series of “model pathways to completion,” designed to help students complete their journey in a timely fashion.<sup>8</sup>

- *Institutions should change the way they attend to the task of developmental education.*

Institutions should begin by carrying out a detailed analysis of existing developmental education courses and the sequence of courses that lead to college-level work. In addition to changes in pedagogy and assessment, institutions should contextualize and/or integrate basic-skills instruction into college-level courses and accelerate, through mainstreaming, the movement of developmental education students through the curriculum. This can be achieved by placing some students referred to developmental education directly into college-level courses where they receive additional instruction through companion classes (e.g., learning communities), labs, or other supports such as supplemental instruction.

- *Institutions should align academic support to key first-year courses.*

Academic support should be aligned to key first-year courses, which are considered foundational to different programs of study, and to basic-skills courses where accelerated learning is possible. Wherever feasible, academic support should be embedded in key first-year courses, so that it is contextualized to the content of the course and the students’ learning of that content. Institutions should promote collaboration between those who teach courses and those who provide support and do so in ways that lead to a seamless blend of teaching and support.

- *Institutions should establish early warning systems for key first-year courses.*

Institutions should establish early warning systems for key-first year courses in ways that not only provide feedback to faculty about student performance but also trigger the provision of support when it is needed. Such systems should be proactive and provide academic support as early as possible in an academic term.<sup>9</sup> Wherever possible, institutions should utilize technology to facilitate the wider adoption of early warning systems across campus.

- *Institutions should ensure that all first-year students have the experience of learning in community with others.*

Whether it takes the form of learning communities that link at least two courses in which students enroll, of learning academies in which students, faculty and staff come together for particular fields of study, or of courses that utilize pedagogies of engagement such as cooperative or project-based learning strategies, institutions should ensure that every first-year student has the experience of learning in community with others. Where feasible, institutions should establish learning communities for all first-year students in ways that provide for interdisciplinary, contextualized learning. Institutions must provide the faculty and staff with the support and time they need to ensure that the content and activities of the individual courses constituting a learning community are coherently linked and designed to foster shared learning experiences among students. Wherever possible, learning communities should also be made available to those who enter academically underprepared, in ways that link one or more basic-skills courses to a college credit-bearing course.

- *Institutions should provide advising to all new students and to those who change majors.*

Institutions should provide a blend of individual, group, and online advising to all new students to ensure the greatest possible use of advising resources. They should require, whenever possible, developmental advising to those who are undecided in their field of study. Special attention should be paid to the needs of students who are the first in their families to attend college, especially those from low-income backgrounds. An advising center should be staffed by professional advisers working in liaison with faculty. Once students enroll in a specific program of study, they should be advised

by faculty members in the program. A separate office should be established to advise students who change their major. Wherever possible, institutions should utilize technology to ensure that students can access advising whenever the need arises.

- *Institutions should invest in faculty development, especially for new faculty and those who teach the key first-year courses.*

Institutions should require all new faculty who have not otherwise received training to participate in a two-year faculty development program, preferably one that takes the form of a faculty learning community. Such a program should place particular emphasis on the use of classroom assessment techniques and pedagogies of engagement that actively involve students in learning with others. Special attention should be paid to those who teach first-year courses that are foundational to different programs of study, and those that make up the basic-skills course sequence. Whenever possible, adjunct faculty members should be included along with full-time members in faculty development activities.

Three observations about these recommendations: First, they focus primarily on the first year of college and the classrooms of that year. It is in that beginning part of the student career and in those places where students and faculty meet that institutions should initially direct their actions. The point of doing so is not only to establish a sound foundation upon which subsequent learning is built, but also help students develop sufficient momentum (e.g. credits hours) to propel them forward to program and degree completion. Second, given the centrality of the classroom to institutional action, these recommendations highlight the importance of the faculty to institutional efforts to enhance student success and, in turn, the need for institutions to attend to faculty development. Third, they point up the need for an organizational structure that coherently aligns institutional actions, so as to promote student retention systematically from entry to completion. Just as student success does not arise by chance, neither does institutional success.

### ■ Closing Comment

The classroom is the building block upon which student retention is built and the pivot around which institutional action for student retention must be organized. But while institutions have invested for years in reten-

tion programs, they have yet to significantly reshape the college classroom and student experience within the classroom. If we hope to make significant gains in retention and graduation, institutions must focus on the classroom experience and student success in the classroom and align classrooms one to another in ways that provide students a coherent pathway that propels them to program completion. In doing so, institutions must also focus on the acquisition of knowledge and skills students require for life after college. Lest we forget, the goal of retention is not only that students stay in college and graduate, but that they learn while doing so.

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