Improving Community College Student Success

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Daniel Fusch, Academic Impressions

Last week, a new study involving 13 participating institutions, Jobs for the Future, and the Delta Cost Project released a report on cost return for student success initiatives; with the report, the researchers made available a cost-return calculator that ties program-level cost data to student outcomes in success programs. With increasing federal and public pressure to increase graduation rates, it is important to adopt a strategic and measured approach to improving student success.

Given the limited resources (yet often greater flexibility) of the community college, Joyce Romano, vice president for student affairs at Valencia Community College, and Maureen Pettitt, director of institutional research at Skagit Valley College, suggest these keys for improving student success at two-year institutions:

- Stay focused on 2-3 "big ideas" (and prioritize specific strategies to meet them)
- Benchmark your progress (and plan for how you will do that before you even begin collecting the data)

Focus on 2-3 Big Ideas

The main thing is to be very focused on what you're doing and why you're doing it. Have a theory of practice. What is the big idea that you're trying to accomplish? Why do you believe that will be successful?

Joyce Romano, Valencia Community College

Pinpointing the 2-3 outcomes that will have the most significant impact on student success is critical; each outcome becomes an "organizing idea" that can help you prioritize new programs and efforts to revise
policies and procedures. For example, if you believe that increasing students' time on task in developmental education is where you will see the largest gains in academic success and persistence, this core idea will give you direction as you develop strategies to achieve it. You can look at investments in tutoring, in learning communities, in peer mentoring.

Or suppose one of the "big ideas" for your campus is planning. Students with a plan and clear goals are more motivated and more likely to succeed. If this is one of your core outcomes, you might choose to invest in a stronger planning component in academic advising. In this case, you might focus on offering:

- Online academic planning tools
- Financial literacy tools
- Career planning tools
- A job placement search and job portfolio
- An academic and career planning component in a student success course.

Be thoughtful (and thorough) in defining your outcomes. "A strong sense of community" might be an excellent "big idea," or it might be just a means to reach some more critical outcome. For example, for Valencia Community College, fostering community is seen as one means of increasing time on task. As a student feels a part of a social learning group, the student will be more motivated to spend time on task with that group. In that case, maybe your best investments turn out to be increasing math lab time, using more group projects in the classroom, and developing a social network among your students.

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Develop a model, then develop strategies to enact that model, and then measure your success. Particular initiatives may not work as expected. Go back to your model. It is very centering, and creates a common focus for your institution.
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Joyce Romano, Valencia Community College

**Make the Impact as Early as Possible**

Another "big idea" at Valencia Community College, and one that Romano recommends for other two-year colleges, is "Start right."
Identify what you think is most important for your students to experience early in their experience at your school, in order to improve their academic success. Set those things up as requirements early on.

Joyce Romano, Valencia Community College

Two-year institutions are frequently reluctant to require orientation for new students, often out of a fear of losing enrollment. "But if you are making a commitment to student success, then you have to stand behind what will prepare students to be successful in their earliest experiences on campus."

Other measures you can take include:

- Ensure that your registration system enforces a prioritized sequence of courses for students who test into developmental reading or math
- Don't allow students to add a course after the class has started, without special permission
- Require a student success seminar

If students are not permitted to add courses in their second or third week, you can ensure that they do not miss those first crucial weeks of learning. "Also," Romano notes, "your faculty are assured that they can start their class on the first minute of the first day, without fear that a week later they will have a different group of students. And students know they have to be prepared the first minute of the first day."

If you require a student success class, make sure that it is more comprehensive than just an academic and study skills course. The seminar should definitely include instruction on time management and test preparation, but don't lose the opportunity to include a lot more:

- Include a career & educational planning component -- this will help your students "start right" by encouraging them to plan ahead and stay focused on goals
- Get them acquainted with college resources (support services, labs, libraries, advising, and any resources that are available online)

There's no silver bullet, but you may be able to find some "quick wins."

Maureen Pettitt, Skagit Valley College

One program Pettitt found effective at Skagit Valley College was a "peer calling" program, in which work
study students received some initial training, and were allotted a desk and a phone (with a supervisor available to answer questions). In the evenings, the students called first-term students who were new to the college to ask how they were doing, how their courses were going, whether there was anything they needed. Peer-to-peer calling was an effective way to get students advice and access to additional resources early in their first quarter. The training included scripts and specific contacts callers could refer students to for different support services.

**Benchmark Your Progress**

Be really intentional about communicating with stakeholders what you’re doing and why. Come up with a process to let data drive the decision making. And discuss that before you even collect data. Even if you can have a general conversation about “What do we think will make the most difference?” you can start identifying what you’ll need to measure.

Joyce Romano, Valencia Community College

Romano recommends preparing a “research proposal” and having it vetted and approved before you even begin compiling data on the effectiveness of your initiatives. The proposal ought to identify clearly what data you’ll examine, how you will interpret it, and how you will know whether the initiative has made a difference. "Proposing the research beforehand allows you to not end up at a point where you roll out the data and then everyone argues over its validity.” Instead, focus on getting the relevant stakeholders bought in to your metrics from the start.

**Everyone at the college has a job that they need to get done, and that job isn't this "big picture" work. A faculty member may have 5 courses to teach this term. So connect the dots for them, show them why this effort is relevant. Tell the story: First we did A, and we learned this, and that's why we're doing B.**

Joyce Romano, Valencia Community College

In evaluating the impact of initiatives to improve student success and persistence, Romano recommends taking into account an array of metrics, not just the retention rate. Also consider quantitative measures such as:
• Percentage of students to end a particular course with a C or better (and filter that data by different demographics)
• The return on the cost of your program (using the Lumina calculator or a similar spreadsheet)

Also consider qualitative measures:
• Feedback from students (via focus groups and other interviews): How do they describe their experience?
• Feedback from faculty: how did they experience the intervention? Did they see it as a motivating force?

Also consider what Romano calls the "human impact." At a small college, a 5% difference might not sound impressive when you tell the story of your efforts. "But if you look at the number of students, and find that 200 people would not otherwise have made it, that looks different!" Then look at ethnicity. Of those 200 that improved, how many were African American? How many were Hispanic? Are you making a proportionally higher impact among underserved students?

It will be easier to secure administrative support for a little risk-taking and a new pilot program if you are very clear on how you'll measure your success.

Maureen Pettitt, Skagit Valley College