

DEVELOPING THE BIG PICTURE: HOW POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS SUPPORT STUDENT PERSISTENCE

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Strategies for Success

January 9, 2009

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Evidence from Two Projects

2

- Indiana Project on Academic Success (IPAS)
 - Action-research initiative
 - Partnered with 15 institutions across Indiana for 4 years
- College Board Pilot Study on Student Retention
 - Asking institutions what they do to support persistence
 - Asking students about their experiences with institutional efforts

Taking Aim at Enhancing Persistence

3

Improving persistence is too often approached like medieval warfare; we hope that if we fire enough arrows into the air we will hit our targets.

- ❑ You have \$1.3 million to fund retention initiatives
- ❑ How do you decide what you will spend your money on?
- ❑ How will you know if it works?

The Role of the Institution in Supporting Persistence

4

- Many have pointed to the importance of this question

(Braxton, 1999; Hossler, 2005; Perna & Thomas, 2006; Tinto & Pusser, 2006)

- Policy levers

- Work identifying pivotal practices

(Braxton, Hirschy, McClendon, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Stage & Hossler, 2000)

- Directions identified through theory and research

(Braxton & McClendon, 2001-2002; Peterson, 1993)

- Empirical record remains uneven

(Patton, Morelon, Whitehead, & Hossler, 2006)

Indiana Project on Academic Success

Midwest Religious University

6

Context for the Intervention

- ❑ In period of significant change
- ❑ Identified retention of undeclared students as an area of concern
- ❑ Developed a program and center for 'Life Calling'
- ❑ Anecdotally, staff believed the program was working, but they wanted a more rigorous evaluation

Findings

- ❑ Regression analysis found a significant & positive program effect
- ❑ Participants indicated in interviews they felt empowered to lead more intentional lives and navigate external expectations

Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana

7

Context for Intervention

- Period of significant enrollment growth & no additional budget
- Staff identified academic literacy, retention, and financial need as areas of concern
- Due to limitations in resources & following some research the staff began to focus on a single intervention, mandatory orientation

Findings

- Participants reported feeling more welcome, knowing campus better
- Faculty reported spending less time orienting students
- Regression analysis showed that the program helped equalize persistence of first-year students

Key Components of Program Success

8

MRU

- Well-funded
- Program benefitted from high levels of support (at highest levels)
- Strong tie to broader institutional vision
- Sense of purpose and belief among staff and students

ITCCI

- Pooled resources
- High levels of support
- A single, targeted effort
- Feedback loops built into the initiative

College Board Pilot Study on Student Retention

Pilot Survey of Institutional Retention Practices

10

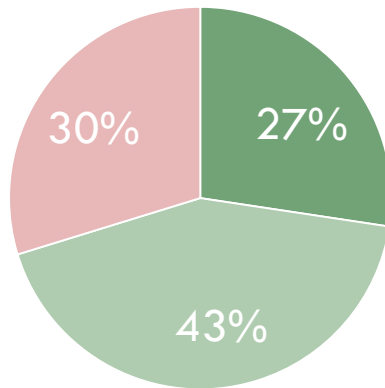
2006:

Survey of
4-year
institutions in
California,
Georgia,
Indiana,
New York, &
Texas

- Selection criteria
- Web-based administration
 - 275 institutions surveyed
 - Response rate of 32.8%
- Findings focus on:
 - Retention Coordinator & Institutional Retention Committee
 - Actionable Institutional Policies/Practices

Institutional Characteristics

11



■ Baccalaureate ■ Masters ■ Research

□ Mean SAT scores:

- 995 (25th percentile)
- 1195 (75th percentile)

□ Mean scores on select variables

- Fall-to-fall retention rate for first time 1st year students 78.12% (national mean =74.4%)
- 72% of first-year students living in campus residence halls

□ Median revenue figures

- Instructional expenses \$6,076
- Tuition and fee revenues \$8207/per FTE
- Total revenue \$70,643,587

Retention Coordination

12

100 Campuses

60 had RC's

24 had RC's with
programmatic
authority

15 had RC's with
budget authority

- 60% of campuses reported having a retention coordinator
- However, the average amount of this person's time allocated to coordinating efforts was less than 1/3 FTE
- Just 40% of these coordinators reported authority to implement new programs
- Only 25% reported authority to fund initiatives

Policies for Faculty Interaction & Early Warning

13

Early Warning

- 58.1% report they collect mid-term grade information for first-year students

However...

- 52.9% report they do not flag specific courses with high percentages of **Ds, Fs, or Withdrawals**

Faculty Interaction Practices

- 61.0% report average class size for courses primarily taken by 1st year students is between **1-30 students**

However...

- 69.2% report that incentives for full-time faculty to teach first-year classes were **non-existent or small**

Academic Advising

14

Advising Practices

- 82.6% require first-year students to meet with an academic advisor **every term**
- 70.0% report that **incentives** for full-time faculty to serve as academic advisors were non-existent or small

Advising Roles

- 57.1% estimate that more than three-quarters of their first-year students were **advised by full-time faculty**
- 28.4% estimate that more than three-quarters of first-year students were **advised by professional advisors**

Some Lessons Learned

Put Someone in Charge

16

- *Ensure that someone on campus is charged with coordinating or directing all campus efforts to improve persistence and graduation.*
 - While student success is everyone's job...
 - In an environment of scarce resources, efforts can benefit from coordination and systemic approaches
 - Can help avoid *salad bar* approach to retention—a few well-coordinated, well-supported programs may yield better results than a lot of poorly support programs

Give Coordinators Authority

17

- *Ensure that individuals charged with oversight as well as implementation of retention initiatives have sufficient resources.*
 - Money may be necessary, but it is not sufficient
 - Resources defined broadly to include authority, personal and professional encouragement, as examples

Develop Benchmarks

18

Successful colleges pay attention to graduation rates. They monitor year-to-year change, study the impact of different interventions on student outcomes, break down the numbers among different student populations, and continuously ask themselves how they could improve.
– Kevin Carey, 2008, Education Sector

- *Develop a set of benchmark indicators that provide goals to strive for in campus efforts to enhance graduation rates.*
 - Retention efforts seemed to work best when tied to broader sense of mission
 - Enabled staff to gauge efficacy of their efforts and how their work fit into the bigger picture
 - Benchmarks essential for measuring program efficacy

Report, Report, Report

19

- *Insist on annual reports for senior policy makers and the board of trustees that provide evidence of the efficacy of campus policies and practices intended to enhance student persistence.*
 - Requiring reports can lead to assessment of programs and help foster a culture of inquiry
 - Reports serve as a vehicle for focusing institutional energies on persistence

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