DEVELOPING THE BIG PICTURE: HOW POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS SUPPORT STUDENT PERSISTENCE
Evidence from Two Projects

- 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

- 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

- 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)
Midwest Religious University

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

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

**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

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

- 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

- Mean SAT scores:
  - 995 (25th percentile)
  - 1195 (75th percentile)
Retention Coordination

- 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 then 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

#### 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 1\textsuperscript{st} 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

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
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

- 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

- 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

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
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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