Institutional policies lower college student success

College graduation rates are distressingly low in our country, with wide variation among institutions, despite recent efforts by institutions to improve. Why is this? Over the past 15 years, I have worked at my own university and examined graduation rates at many institutions as well as spending time on more than two dozen campuses and my conclusion is that the cumulative effect of institutional policies unintentionally hinder student success. **It is no surprise then, that a majority of students drop out while in good academic standing, contrary to widely held beliefs on campuses that students leave because they are not academically prepared.**

Here are six institutional barriers to student success, found on a majority of campuses, that can be fixed at little or no cost.

**Degree requirements are not clear.** Open any college catalog and try to determine the requirements to earn a degree in any field. They are pretty much incomprehensible: there are state requirements, university requirements, college specific requirements and departmental requirements. At best, they can only be navigated after considerable study. There are often hundreds of choices to fulfill the General Education requirements with little or no guidance to the student. Selecting the wrong ones can add a semester or more to the degree program. There is a very low-cost solution: Degree Maps, a two- or four-year list of sequenced courses necessary to earn a degree. Some schools are addressing the issue and developing maps, but the efforts and results are uneven as they are often incomplete and fail to highlight critical courses that must be taken in the term listed in order to graduate on time.

**A required course is not offered or is offered without enough seats or offered at a time that conflicts with other required courses.** This is most common in the sciences where degree requirements overlap in several majors, but it occurs in all fields. Again, the solution costs little. A spreadsheet file can be set up to track required courses by major and the historical flow of students through that major to estimate the number of seats needed each term. Commercial software is available but not necessary.

**Registration holds**. Registration holds are institutional rules designed to stop students from registering until certain conditions (typically financial) have been met. These are widely abused and often unnecessary. Holds are placed for unpaid parking fines or other debt to the institution or for what seem to be trivial issues. It seems perverse that the student is prevented from paying the school tuition, usually $6,000 or more, over a $25 parking fine. Typically, the amounts are small, but the effect on students can be large. With registration holds in place, students often miss their assigned registration periods trying to sort this out, and, when they ultimately do register, many classes are full and unavailable. Nonetheless, they still need 12 hours to maintain full-time status so they complete their schedule with whatever courses they can. This generates excess hours, spending money unnecessarily, and prolonging their time in college. All this, even though holds are not usually necessary because the institution controls the transcript and the degree and can withhold both if needed.

**Students who transfer lose almost half or more of their credits.** Large numbersof students transfer from one institution to another each year.In the process,they can lose a substantial number of the credits they have earned and for which they have already paid.According to the Government Accountability Office, on average a student loses 43% of their credits when transferring and about 35% of all students transfer at least once. This is an outrageous situation. It is even more outrageous when an upper division institution will not accept, what is, by most measures, the same course taken at the community college as that offered at the upper division school. At least half of the transfer students had a Pell grant and two-thirds had a Federal Direct Loan, thus a substantial proportion of lost credits were paid for through federal financial aid. Articulation agreements and policies on transferring credits are required to be posted by the Higher Education Opportunity Act but the reality is highly variable and often incomplete.

**Financial aid policies.** Financial aid is critical for many students if they are going to attend college. Experience shows, however, that institutional financial aid processes can work against those who need the assistance most. Many schools provide financial aid on a first-come, first-served basis. This exacerbates the educational gap between high and low socioeconomic families because data show that the neediest students apply relatively late and therefore miss out on funds for which they otherwise would be eligible. Holding some institutional or discretionary funds for need-based aid is a good, low cost, strategy to address the needs of students who apply late in the cycle for whatever reason. Further, schools almost never consider all sources of aid when packaging financial aid. Such aid includes federal funds, state funds, institutional funds and private funds held in the institution’s foundation. Foundations of larger institutions often have hundreds of thousands of dollars in unallocated aid since this source of funds often is not as closely tracked or integrated into the major sources of available aid. Scholarships established years in the past are often neglected and some have criteria that are difficult to meet. Improving the use of such funds requires some administrative attention, but again, a relatively small investments can greatly help many students. In addition, these foundation funds, once identified and tracked closely, can yield an unanticipated bonus: they may also be used for “graduation grants,” usually a small amount of money that allows a student to complete college.

**Too little emphasis is put on the need for students to earn 30 credits a year in order to graduate in two or four years.**  The most effective way to reduce the cost of college is to graduate on time and, for most disciplines, that means earning 30 credits a year, preferably by earning 15 credits a term. There are two comments made by almost everyone on campus as to why this cannot be done, and both are testable hypotheses. The first is: “All of our students work and therefore cannot take 15 hours.” Perhaps, but it is important to check. Have your student data checked by the state labor department. It is highly likely that many fewer students work than was thought. Regardless of the results, the data can inform your scheduling and other activities. The second is: “Our students are not strong enough to handle 15 hours.” Again, check. Test this by comparing academically matched students who took 15 or more hours with those who took less than 15 hours. In my experience, every time this has been done, those taking 15 or more hours earn more credits, have higher grades and a higher retention rate than those who take fewer hours.

Most of these issues (and others) can be fixed at little or no cost if the leadership of the institution has a strong commitment to student success. Commitment means measuring every action or decision against the question: Does this enhance student success? The answer to this question depends on collecting and analyzing detailed data on all aspects of students as they move toward graduation. It includes reviewing every university process from course scheduling to financial services through the lens of a student. Is this business process transparent and accessible to students and is it even necessary? Does course scheduling meet the needs of every student to stay on track to graduate on time? Commitment involves challenging every statement that is used as an excuse or reason why something cannot be done that would enhance student success. It is the role of leaders to foster and sustain this commitment but given the high turnover of senior academic leaders, few are in place long enough to implement the needed changes.

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