

What College Presidents Need to Know about Student Success

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ABSTRACT

Advocated in this article is the transformative effect of understanding a student's unique educational story through data analysis and effective interpersonal-questioning techniques. As stories are understood and trust established, institutions can respond by helping each student design an ongoing personalized success plan. The result is the creation of a campus culture of student success where rhetoric, policy, and practice are aligned.

A student arrives on your campus with a unique educational story. Each story is diverse and layered with the complex interplay of academic, social, financial, and wellness themes. Your equitable inventory and response to each student's story can yield positive results in terms of student and institutional success. Your compassionate and intentional strategy for addressing these narratives can have a significant and meaningful return on your investment of time, attention, and resources.

1. A Compelling Academic Theme

Understanding and responding to a student's academic story can strengthen your institution's approach to student success and foster an environment that celebrates student learning and personal growth. Enhancing student learning is the central goal of every worthwhile student success initiative. As you move forward with your plan, start by asking, "What can we know about each student's academic story?" And, based on what we discover, "How can we align our efforts and resources to help each student create a personalized academic success plan?"

Academic Inventory Checklist

- To understand our students, are we analyzing historical student data to see which themes emerge as the top predictors of academic success?
 - Have we considered adjusting high-school grade-point averages by high school to see if incoming GPAs are a top predictor of first-semester academic success? Do term grade-point averages become a top predictor of future academic success?
- What assessments do we utilize to help us build an academic inventory for each student?
 - Do we have a strong understanding of where our students have been, where they are now, and where they hope to go academically?
 - Do we take the time to help students explore their options for majors and minors?
 - Do we encourage our students to create parallel plans?
- Does our institution have a plan that incorporates both proactive and reactive academic support strategies?

- Does our response to our academic assessment plan include strengthening core thinking, communicating, and creating skills, e.g., Bloom’s Taxonomy?
- What intentional academic support structures does our institution utilize?
- Do we have someone who has been tasked with coordinating our academic support initiatives? Are these initiatives aligned?
- Does our institution utilize the “students helping students” model to scale support?
- Have we created a plan to support students as they take courses with historically high D, F, W rates?
- Do all of our students have access to High Impact Practices?

2. A Unique Financial Theme

For students, degree progress requires access to resources and financial support on their journey toward graduation and post-graduation success. Helping students afford being at your institution will increase persistence and graduation rates. Students will have the resources they need while also knowing that you care about the details of their journey. Nationally, more college students are experiencing unmet financial need. Lauren Walizer at The Center for Law and Social Policy reported that “nearly 3 in 4 students experience unmet need.” Without adequate financial and basic-needs support, your students may work longer hours, take fewer credit hours, increase their loan amounts, or drop out of your programs. College affordability strategies should be fundamental to your institutional degree-completion strategy. By employing intentional and often innovative strategies to close affordability gaps, you can help more students focus on learning and empower them to persist to graduation.

Financial Inventory Checklist

- Has our institution analyzed student unmet-financial-need data?
 - On average, how much unmet need do our students have?
 - Which student groups have the most unmet financial need? What are their retention and graduation rates?
- Do we offer need-based scholarships and persistence grants? If so, what does our giving look like in these areas? Are these scholarships also paired with programmatic support?
- Do we offer Emergency Scholarships and Loans? Who is being served by these scholarships? Is there potential to grow these scholarships?
- Do we offer basic-needs scholarships? Housing and dining scholarships? Book scholarships? What is our plan or response to Open Educational Resources?
- Have we discussed the possibility of increasing on-campus student-employment opportunities?
- What financial resources and knowledge do our students need to persist to graduation and for post-graduation success?

3. A Powerful Social Theme

Students arrive to your campus with a unique social story. Although the reasons for student attrition are complex and often include academic, financial, and wellness themes, many students do not persist because of a lack of social belonging and engagement. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, retention rates for first-time, full-time undergraduates who pursued a bachelor's degree at a 4-year public degree-granting institution or at a 2-year degree-granting institution were 81% and 62%, respectively. To increase the likelihood of success for your students, especially for students of color and those who have been historically underserved, requires being intentional about social-belonging and engagement strategies.

Social Themes Inventory Checklist

- Are we working to ensure that every new student has the opportunity to experience a sense of belonging?
- Do we know who our first-generation college students are?
- Do we have personalized resources for students from small towns?
- Has our leadership team recently reviewed “social-belonging” research and best practices?
 - The College Transition Collaborative: <http://collegetransitioncollaborative.org/>
 - Social-Belonging for College Students: <https://www.perts.net/orientation/cb>
- Do we offer all of our students emotional and social intelligence learning opportunities?

4. A Meaningful Wellness Theme

Wellness is not an add-on or peripheral experience in life, so neither should our campus wellness messages and programs. Pain, whether physical or emotional, can distract the brain from being fully present in the learning process. Creating an environment where a student's personal wellness journey is respected and supported should be a central part of your student success strategy.

Wellness Inventory Checklist

- How do we define and communicate about wellness on our campus?
- Does our campus-wide leadership team embody principles of wellness?
- Do we communicate with our students the importance of self-care?
- Are wellness principles incorporated in the classroom experience?

When Themes Collide – Understanding a Student's Success Story

As your campus seeks to strengthen your academic programs and opportunities, student financial support and affordability agenda, social-engagement efforts, and wellness messaging and practices, taking a moment to think about what it feels like to be a student at your institution is important. Creating space so that a student's story – where they were, where they are now, and where they are going – is also important. How you respond to that story, however, – with intentionality and by aligning resources and creating opportunities – is what defines you as an educational institution. How you support the students who display clear need in one of the major themes or in multiple themes is significant.

The process of understanding a student's story so that you can create a plan for maximizing your institution's limited resources, human capital, and time is essential. Knowing when and where to lead after exploring your students' themes is key in creating a strong student-success strategy.

Intentional Leadership Strategies Checklist

- What is your institution's response to a student who displays academic, social, financial, and wellness need?
 - Could you create a Student Success Task Force of passionate and knowledgeable individuals who can help enhance and align academic, financial, social, and wellness support for your students?
 - Could the Task Force start by creating a "Student Success Inventory" to see where you have been, where you are now, and where you are going with your campus-wide student-success strategy?
 - Does your plan take into account important transition points: summers, semester-to-semester persistence, key milestones, academic progress, and the post-graduation shift?
 - Is there a relationship between unmet financial need, first-generation status, and academic success?
- One-to-one helping relationships often find their way to the heart of every conversation on student success. Has your campus discussed the reality that practices only become best practices because of best practitioners?
 - What is your campus' strategy for developing best practitioners?
- Is your institution leveraging technology to support students? As a student, what does it feel like to access campus-required software? Are students experiencing software fatigue? Email fatigue? What recommendations does your committee have for truly leveraging software to simplify and enhance the campus and classroom experience?

References

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