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Retention and student success:

Implementing strategies that make a difference

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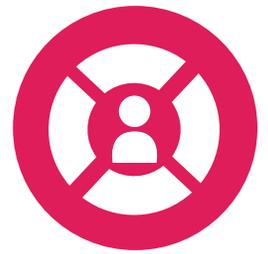
Introduction

A sharpened focus on retention, persistence, and graduation has colleges and universities looking for more effective ways to support student success. But even for institutions with a transparent focus on persistence, putting effective programs in place is difficult. Chrissy Coley, Tim Coley, and Katie Lynch-Holmes, senior consultants with Ellucian, describe what institutions can do today to design, develop, and launch retention and student success programs that work.

You've probably heard the old adage—in fact, you might have heard it from a professor of yours when you were a first-year student in college: "Look to your left. Look to your right. Next year one of you will not be sitting here." There was a time when an institution's prestige was tied to its ability to weed out students—when our attitude about student success was simply sink or swim. Thanks to the work of such scholars as John Gardner and George Kuh, colleges and universities began to develop a new perspective on student success. Whether we measure that success by persistence to graduation, transfer success, time to degree, or improved learning outcomes, we know that we bear responsibility for providing students with the support they need to achieve their goals.

But what kind of support? In the past few decades, we've seen a virtual cottage industry of retention initiatives spring up on our campuses—writing centers, remedial curricula, academic resource centers, outreach and engagement programs—the list is a varied and creative one. Yet, in spite of the attention paid to retaining students, we have made very little progress on a national scale. For instance, in its 2013 Digest of Education Statistics, the National Center for Education Statistics noted that nationally, slightly over 1.5 million first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students began their undergraduate careers at four-year colleges and universities in the fall of 2006. However, only four in ten (39 percent) actually achieved their goal of earning a bachelor's degree within four years, and six in ten (59.2 percent) completed their degrees within six years. Degree and certificate completion

at two-year colleges is even more sobering. Of the 857,607 first-time students who enrolled at two-year public institutions in fall 2007, only 26.5 percent completed degrees or certificates from their starting institution within six years, according to the National Student Clearinghouse. ACT trend data confirm that four-year and two-year graduation rates over the last 30 years have remained relatively flat; thus, as a nation we have failed to move the needle in the right direction.

Clearly, our efforts to support students to graduation can be improved. As policy makers continue to shift their focus from access—as important as that has been to the equitable delivery of education services—to completion, the failure of these efforts is likely to come under increasing scrutiny. Consider the policy-makers' perspective:

- According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, students who graduate with a two- or four-year degree in hand can expect to earn up to 70 percent more than those who complete only a high school diploma

- Our economic recovery depends in large part on how well we succeed at delivering education and retraining

- Building human capital to drive innovation is critical to sustaining our global standing

Federal programs, such as the Obama administration's American Graduation Initiative and the U.S. Department of Education's plan to tie financial aid to college performance and published college ratings, sharpen the focus on retention, persistence, and graduation. As that focus sharpens, and the demand for accountability continues to grow, student success will become a critical factor that will affect funding, reputations, and rankings.

A more diligent approach to student success

When major news outlets are highlighting student retention, you can be sure the topic has people's attention. A unique combination of factors is at play in our renewed attention to student success. Today, accrediting agencies are demanding higher levels of accountability around outcomes, as are policy makers and citizens concerned over the value that education delivers. These demands have spurred movements like the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA), and the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN). Professional organizations are also challenging member institutions to move from emphasizing access to emphasizing success. For instance, the American Association of Community Colleges' 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges has challenged two-year institutions to close achievement gaps and increase the percentage of students successfully completing developmental education programs.

Additionally, states are increasingly moving to higher education funding formulas that allocate some amount of funding based on performance indicators such as course completion, time-to-degree, or transfer rates. In some states, funding also is tied to the number of degrees awarded to low-income and minority student graduates. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 25 states currently have a performance-based formula in place, including Ohio and Tennessee. Other states across the country are watching the results carefully.

But increased scrutiny around outcomes isn't the only reason we are paying closer attention to student success. High school graduation rates and population demographics across the country are shifting rapidly. According to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), some parts of the country, particularly the Northeast and Midwest, will experience declines in the number of high school graduates over the next decade, making student success and retention a clear priority. Many Southeast and Western states will see significant growth in the number of high school graduates, particularly first-generation and under-represented college students who may require additional academic, financial, and social supports to persist to degree completion. These demographic changes bring with them a new reality. Institutions will have to work harder to retain the students they have traditionally enrolled, as well as deliver new kinds of support to new groups of students. Finding better ways to retain and progress students, then, is something we owe to everyone seeking an education from our institutions.

So how do you bridge the gap between theory and execution? ACT's 2010 report, "What Works in Student Retention" found that:

- While approximately 60 percent of two-year colleges and 70 percent of four-year institutions have identified an individual responsible for coordinating retention strategies, there is still opportunity for significant improvement

- Only 32 percent of two-year colleges, 54 percent of four-year privates, and 66 percent of four-year publics have established an improvement goal for retention of students from the first to second year

- Only 23 percent of two-year colleges, 36 percent of four-year privates, and 53 percent of four-year publics have established a goal for improved degree completion

In their follow-up 2010 AIR Forum paper, "Retention: Diverse Institutions = Diverse Retention Practices," the report's authors conclude that "while many known retention practices are in use today, their use is far from universal across institutions." In his foreword to the 2014 publication What Excellent Community Colleges Do, Anthony P. Carnevale observes that despite the attention being paid to student success, "the fundamental structures of community colleges have not evolved to make student success the core business." The literature indicates the same can be said for four-year institutions as well.

Even at those institutions with a transparent focus on persistence, we find that "moving the needle" is still difficult. A 2009 Ellucian survey indicated a perception by academic administrators that most at-risk students don't take advantage of available support services even when they are aware of them. We also know that even when institutions are able to identify at-risk students, resources for delivering appropriate interventions are limited. And when the institution has no systematic way to identify at-risk students early enough to make a real impact on persistence, those problems are only compounded.

From theory to execution

But the news is not all bad. The Education Trust confirms that some colleges and universities are doing better than others when it comes to defining and supporting student success, even when holding constant institutional and student characteristics. For instance, some small private colleges have realized retention rates of around 95 percent for first-time, full-time students, and larger, public institutions that provide supportive initiatives for students, have achieved retention rates around 90 percent. While two-year technical and community colleges serve a wider variety of students, the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program has identified institutions that have demonstrated exceptional levels of success; for instance, several Aspen Prize finalists graduated 35–40 percent of their fall 2007 first-time, full-time student cohorts, several percentage points higher than the national average.

What sets these institutions apart? We think, in part, they have been able to find ways to bridge the gap between theory and execution by clearly defining the factors contributing to better retention and graduation and by engaging faculty, administrators, and students alike in

a shared goal. While the programs they have created to support student success vary, these institutions have made a visible, and indeed measurable, commitment to student success.

This commitment represents the changing climate in how higher education views student success. Today, a substantial body of research demonstrates that what colleges and universities do about student success matters. And, increasingly, administrators and faculty understand that doing something early matters even more.

Redefining "early"

Traditionally, colleges and universities have used final course grades to signal academic success. But we know that even by midterm, time is already running out for meaningful interventions. Today, we have better data about the factors that contribute to student success or student failure. And we are using that data to develop early intervention programs that can help get students back on track early.

In order to succeed, students need to be supported both academically and socially. And we have made progress in both areas. We know that early academic achievement is a predictor of future success. With that in mind, we have created first-year seminars, developed writing centers, established academic support centers, and experimented with peer tutoring. We also know that students who engage fully in the life of the institution thrive. So we have established learning communities, improved advising, and established bridge programs that recognize the critical importance of a student's first year.

We have also gotten better at identifying the students who would benefit the most from these programs. We know how to look for red flags: absenteeism, weak writing and math skills, poor grades, behavioral changes. We know what social constraints our students will find most challenging: finding peers, struggling economically, juggling family responsibilities. Predictive modeling can draw on pre-enrollment data to help us identify at-risk candidates even before they arrive on campus. And we are putting tools in place to monitor students more consistently and to respond more quickly to what we see and hear. Has a student already missed classes in her first two weeks or performed inadequately on a test or quiz? Has she reported feeling overwhelmed to her academic advisor? Has she failed to engage in your learning management system (LMS) as early or often as you would have expected? By anticipating the needs of our students, we can reach out with appropriate resources—perhaps a study group, or a peer support program—rather than expecting our students, who may not know that such support even exists, to stumble into it on their own.

Research calling for a comprehensive and strategic approach to student success, persistence, and completion is ubiquitous. How, then, can we use this scholarship as a foundation to design, develop, and implement retention strategies that make a measurable difference in recognizing and fostering the potential of all students?

1: Establish a shared vision of student success

We all want our students to succeed. And while discrete departments across the institution can have a real influence on student success, designing and implementing a comprehensive institutional strategy means moving beyond the "hunches" many of your stakeholders have about what drives it. Establishing a shared vision of student success and communicating that vision across your campus means you can more effectively align resources to support defined goals.

Moving from theory to action will mean asking some very specific questions:

- What are our priorities? Do we need to improve overall retention and graduation rates for all students? Do we need to focus on a particular student cohort or academic program?

- How do we define "at risk"? What criteria will we use to assess who is at risk and who isn't? Missed classes? Poor test results? Lack of LMS activity?

- What defines student success? How will we know if our efforts have been successful?

- Do our institutional leaders (president, provost, vice presidents, deans) communicate their vision for student persistence to degree completion to campus constituents, lay out expectations for supporting student learning and success, and allocate resources to ensure goals are achieved?

Delta State University

While Delta State University's Student Success Center had been operating for two years, it needed a more systemic approach to retention. "Ten months ago, no one [person] was really responsible for student retention," says Charles A. McAdams, provost and vice president for Academic Affairs at Delta State University. "If it was one person's job, no one else jumped in. If it was everyone's job, it was no one's job." In January 2014, with the active support of President William LaForge, provost McAdams established a cross-campus Student Success task force made up of four committees: academic advising, early alert, first-year seminar, and institutional data analysis. Under the task force, faculty, staff, and student representatives aligned their efforts to these committees' initiatives. After creating an operational definition and implementation plan, the student retention efforts could expand campus-wide. To further momentum, McAdams met with every department on campus to discuss his vision of academic affairs and share his commitment to helping students succeed. Now, student success efforts engage the academic council, the dean council, and cabinet members as well as freshmen orientation and enrollment groups. "We discussed opportunities, defined context and challenges—both locally and nationally—and set up action plans," says McAdams. "I built support one department at a time. Our success is tied to our students' success—it's the right thing to do for our students and it helps secure a strong financial future for Delta State University."

Ocean County College

Establishing a shared vision of student success has to start with an institution's top leadership and spread through the entire campus to every employee. New Jersey's Ocean County College puts students first, and president Dr. Jon Larson leads by example. He responds directly to every student email to ensure that all students' questions are answered quickly. The same responsiveness and caring is displayed across campus. For example, just one week after launching a volunteer mentoring initiative for students, more than 50 faculty and staff volunteered to serve as mentors for students. Even more inspiring is the fact that many of them were already doing it informally. The college has established policies and procedures to make sure its vision for student success is permeated through the campus. "Ocean County College promotes a student-centered culture," says Dr. Jianping Wang, vice president of Academic Affairs at Ocean County College. "There is an expectation that everyone is expected to embrace this culture and do all they can to support student success." It starts with hiring. Decisions on hiring full-time faculty and bringing adjunct back, promotions for both full- and part-time faculty, and sabbatical awards are all contingent on meeting certain student success criteria. Exemplary staff members and teaching faculty excellence awards are bestowed upon those who contribute to student success and are actively involved in campus life.

2: Focus on what successful students do

Many students come to college with little understanding of what it takes to succeed; they make an assumption that class attendance is optional, or that the level of effort that got them through high school will be sufficient for college work. First-generation and low-income students in particular may lack the cultural capital to know how to navigate complex campus systems. Other students are unfamiliar with the services available to them, whether that is your library's reference desk, your writing center, study groups, tutors, or supplemental instruction. And often, students enrolling in a full-time course of study have to learn, or relearn, what it takes to manage finances, time, and family obligations.

If you want your students to emulate successful behavior, your institution needs to be asking these questions:

- Do our students know what GPA they need to earn and the courses they need to take to maintain academic good standing, to pursue a major program of study, and to maintain scholarships and financial aid?

- Do our students know what resources are available on campus?

- How can the campus use convocation, orientation, and the first-year seminar to articulate expectations?

- What opportunities exist to engage students in educationally purposeful activities both in and out of the classroom?

Mercy College

With four campus locations in the New York City metropolitan area, Mercy College enrolls many first-generation, low-income students. In fall of 2012, 71 percent of its first-time freshmen were Pell Grant recipients. "Our student population is at the heart of the national conversation," says Andy Person, executive director of Student Success and Engagement at Mercy College. "So we had to address the needs of this particular population, help them stay in school and graduate so they could get into the job pool." Mercy's Personalized Achievement Contract (PACT) program, established in spring 2009, is geared to help students learn how to navigate a complex college environment, both in and out of the classroom. It's an intrusive process, it's proactive, it starts at pre-enrollment and continues through graduation. And it's working. Since its inception, first-time, full-time students' fall-to-fall retention rates have increased by 15 percent and graduation rates have increased by 26 percent. At Mercy, PACT mentors are cross-trained in academic advising, financial aid, student support services, and actively engaged from pre-enrollment through every step of the campus experience. They help identify what successful students do differently and give each student one-on-one attention to make sure they do it: take 15 credits each semester, take the right types of courses, focus on life after college, respond quickly to issues, and take initiative to use campus resources.

University of South Carolina

"Successful students use all the resources available, they get involved in research, they participate in extracurricular activities, they are engaged with faculty," says Eric Moschella, director of the Student Success Center at the University of South Carolina. "Basically, it all comes down to engagement. Our Honors College students have tremendous opportunities and they take advantage of everything we have to offer. They are very well guided and advised and we push them as hard as they push themselves. There is a great sense of community." Those same students are also leaders. To foster similar levels of engagement throughout the campus, the University of South Carolina has emphasized the concept of student leadership development as part of its Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for its Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation. "We encourage peer leadership," says Claire Robinson, associate director of the Student Success Center at the University of South Carolina. "For example students take on leadership roles and demonstrate leadership qualities on and off campus." Often, encouraging a student to take that step may require multiple touches, but it all pays off.

3: Determine an intervention strategy

In our experience, schools that create successful campus-wide retention programs have determined a clear methodology to define and identify "at-risk" students, to reach out to students with appropriate resources and support, and to track and monitor student engagement. Intervention strategies often involve faculty and staff who may be involved in formal referral programs or who may help deliver appropriate resources.

Early intervention is key to helping students before problems become too overwhelming to handle. For many students, knowing that someone in the institution cares about how they are performing is a powerful motivator. And helping students establish a solid academic and social foundation for future success is, or should be, an integral part of an institution's core mission.

Delta State University

At Delta State University, helping students succeed is everyone's priority. For this reason, the university's early alert initiative empowers all campus members to act on a student's behalf. "We've given every member on campus (including parents and students) the tools to identify at-risk behaviors and send alerts," says provost Charles A. McAdams. "You can't connect the dots if you don't have a dot to start with." The university's Stay Okra Strong (SOS) campus-wide early alert and intervention process "makes it easy—you click the SOS button and then it walks you through the steps you need to take to get the student the help they need," says Christy Riddle, executive director of the Student Success Center at Delta State University. A significant emphasis is placed on training faculty, frontline staff (such as departmental administrative assistants), residence hall directors, and other staff who serve as a first line of defense in responding to student questions and concerns. Workshops and the SOS website explain not only how to use the technology, but also how to recognize signs that a student is struggling and take appropriate action. Once the SOS alert is sent, a member of the Student Success Center team reaches out to the student to determine if the student alert is behavioral or academic in nature and begins the identified intervention process. "We've [also] implemented follow-up steps so the coordinator that spoke with the student can follow up with whomever sent the referral and let them know what is happening and what is being done," says Riddle.

Ocean County College

In the spring of 2014, Ocean County College reached out to three Toms River high schools and identified 58 students who were economically and academically unprepared for college. The college partnered with the high schools and provided special college success programs and support services. After less than three months of intervention, 28 of those students were college-ready and took college-level English and math at Ocean County College during the summer. What is most remarkable is that just a few months before, many of them didn't even see themselves as college material. "We have to teach students not only how to be successful, but also to believe in their ability to be successful," says Dr. Wang. Because of the program's success, Ocean County College is now looking at replicating the model at other local high schools, and the Ocean County College Foundation has just pledged its financial support for this initiative.

University of South Carolina

The comprehensive Student Success Center at the University of South Carolina includes Academic Coaching and Engagement (ACE) coaching, tutoring, transfer student support services, academic recovery programs, cross-college advising, supplemental instruction, financial literacy programs, and early intervention initiatives. "We do everything we can to support students in and out of the classroom," says Moschella. "The services we offer are all designed to help students navigate fairly common traditional challenges, and we try to offer them while the student is experiencing the stumbling block." Because the Student Success Center relies on referrals from faculty and staff, it launched its new Success Connect initiative in 2013 as a way to formalize referrals both in and out of the center by partnering with academic advisors, Greek advisors, residence life advisors, and other departments across campus. "Now, a cross-college advisor can log into the system and schedule an advisee's meeting with a tutor," says Robinson. "These are active, intentional referrals that help students get immediate attention." Early referrals are so critical that the Student Success Center reached out to the supplemental instruction faculty members who teach high D, F, or withdraw (DFW) rate courses and asked them for referrals. They found that faculty could often predict those students who were going to struggle within the first three weeks of the semester. It's making a significant difference: Students who went to the Student Success Center for help had a three percent attrition rate from fall 2012 to spring 2013, while students who did not take advantage of early intervention had a seven percent attrition rate.

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How can your institution implement early intervention programs that make a difference? To begin, you can ask these questions:

● What is the earliest point at which we know a student is struggling?

● What criteria do we use to determine whether a student is off track? Class attendance, grades, midterms, pre-registration information, degree audits, financial aid information?

● Who should reach out to the student? What systems do we have in place to ensure this person/office receives alerts in a timely manner?

● What resources do we have in place to proactively address students' academic, health, social, and financial needs once they are identified as at risk?

● How do we collaborate with faculty and staff across campus to identify, refer, and intervene with at-risk students?

● How can technology facilitate timely and effective communication with our students?

● How can technology help us monitor academic progress or identify "red flags" that indicate a student may be experiencing problems?
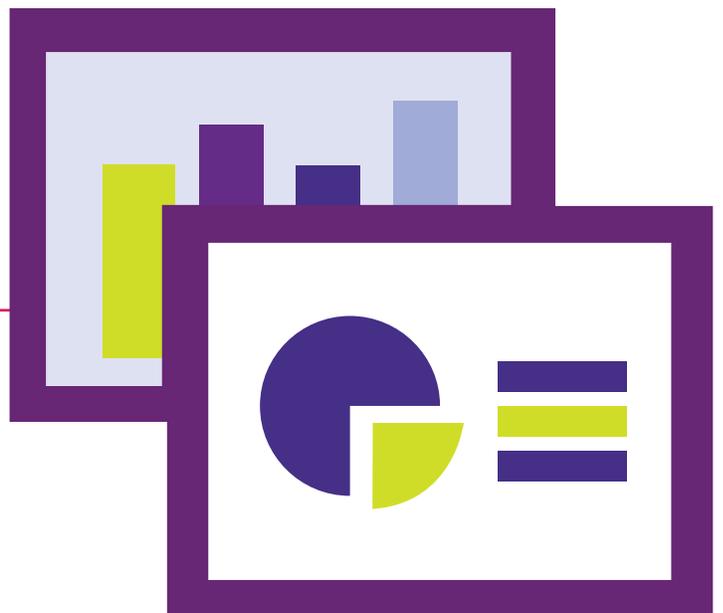
4: Start small and grow

Chances are your institution already has programs and initiatives in place to support student success. Finding those programs and evaluating what works and what doesn't will be critical as you begin to build a more strategic approach to student retention and progression. Starting small—by course, by department, by program, by major—provides a way for you to put systems into place—referral programs, intervention tactics, measures of success, reporting mechanisms—for more comprehensive efforts. If you can foster a model program, communicate its successes to other parts of your campus, and build enthusiasm for it, you can more successfully grow that program in ways that will reach every student on your campus with the appropriate support and outreach.

When evaluating programs that might be good "incubator" candidates, you should consider some of the following questions:

- Where do we want to begin? At the level of our school or college? Department? Major? First-year studies?

- Who are our allies there?

- How will we measure success?

- How can this program improve and grow?

Mercy College

Funded by the President's Office to address the needs of first-generation and low-income students, Mercy College launched a pilot of its Personalized Achievement Contract (PACT) program with 50 students in spring of 2009. The pilot was so successful that the following fall they ramped it up to 500 students, and by 2012, the program included all freshman students. The program has been nationally recognized for its effectiveness in serving at-risk students. In 2010, the American Council on Education recommended PACT to the White House as a model for innovation in higher education, and in 2012, the program's executive director, Andy Person, was selected as one of 10 national recipients of the Outstanding First-Year Student Advocate Award by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at University of South Carolina. According to Mr. Person, the keys to effectively growing a program are to focus initially on a specific student population, generate executive support for the initiative, foster faculty and staff buy-in and involvement, and demonstrate success. Since PACT's inception, first-time, full-time students' fall-to-fall retention rates have increased by 15 percent and graduation rates have increased by 26 percent.

University of South Carolina

In 2005, the University of South Carolina launched its Academic Coaching and Engagement (ACE) program. That year, it had a total of seven appointments. But by 2014, it had upwards of 2,000. That tremendous success is due to the Student Success Center's cultivation of 18 partnerships including five academic units across campus during the past nine years. These partnerships now generate 80 percent of the students who seek ACE coaching, as the academic units require students on academic probation or with faculty referrals to participate in the program. To meet this demand, the ACE program employs three full-time coaches as well as 20 graduate students who coach part-time. Because the coaches see many at-risk students, the Student Success Center has adopted a holistic approach rooted in the groundbreaking theories in The Appreciative Advising Revolution, by Jennifer Bloom, an author, expert, and professor at University of South Carolina. "Before, the questions were focused on study skills," says Robinson. "Now we ask positive, open-ended questions that help the students reflect and create an academic plan based on their strengths." So in addition to asking, "Why did you choose your major?" coaches also ask, "Tell me when you were so engaged in an activity that time just flew by and you felt alive and happy." "This approach doesn't separate the academic from the personal," says Robinson. "We see the student as a whole." Based on a meaningful conversation, the coach can refer the student to a counselor, financial aid officer, or tutor so students get the help they need.

5: Build bridges

To cultivate successful pilot programs into comprehensive, campus-wide student success initiatives, you will need the cooperation of everyone across your campus, and often partners from off campus. Identifying at-risk students can begin with class absences, but it shouldn't end there. Taking a comprehensive approach to student success means finding a way to communicate with every campus stakeholder who holds a piece of the puzzle. And by connecting what is happening inside the classroom with what is happening outside of it, we can provide not one, but multiple safety nets for our students. To build student success initiatives that consider and value the full student experience, collaboration will be key. Student affairs, financial aid, academic affairs—all of these functions and more play a role in student success. A campus-wide student success strategy will need to create common goals, consistent messages, and appropriate incentives to ensure the participation of all of these stakeholders.

To start building bridges on and off your campus, you may want to consider:

- What departments or academic units are already collaborating on our campus? How can we build upon these existing partnerships?

- Which on- and off-campus stakeholders can contribute to our institution's student success vision? How can we pull these stakeholders together to establish common goals and identify mutually beneficial opportunities for collaboration?

- What opportunities exist to integrate resources, initiatives, or synthesize data?

- What incentives are there for collaboration?

Ocean County College

In order to make higher education more accessible and affordable for its students, Ocean County College has developed several strategic partnerships with other institutions. For instance, due to its large aging population, Ocean County College's number one career opportunity is in the health care industry. And because the nursing field is hiring more people with bachelor degrees rather than associate degrees, the college partnered with Kean University to develop a generic bachelor of science in nursing degree. This is a complete innovation because most campuses will offer 2+2 programs, in which students earn their first two years at community college and then transfer to a four-year institution to complete the last two years. But with this joint bachelors program with Kean, students can enroll in the BSN program on the Ocean County College campus and earn the degree while paying more affordable tuition. With this partnership, Kean also delivers a PhD in Nursing Leadership on the Ocean County College campus, so the college offers students the full spectrum of degrees from associate to doctorate. Another strong partnership is with Fairleigh Dickinson University, which works together with Ocean County College to offer Ocean County College graduates a 40 percent tuition reduction so they can afford to transfer to this large private university and complete their studies. Additionally, Fairleigh Dickinson University's master's degree in Student Service Administration is provided on the Ocean County College campus to allow Ocean County College employees seeking further education broader opportunities for professional growth. Dr. Jianping Wang, vice president of Academic Affairs, notes that Ocean County College's partnership with private, public, and businesses is based on the belief that, "together we can achieve more."

University of South Carolina

"Student success doesn't happen in one office," says Eric Moschella, director of the University of South Carolina's Student Success Center. "It happens across the campus. It is a connection and a partnership, and there are multiple people complementing each other's efforts." According to Moschella, the key to the center's success at building bridges has been in discovering what the other person or department needs or wants to accomplish and offering to help them achieve these goals. For example, academic advising was a challenge because the colleges and programs had different standards, processes, and advising models. The university decided to invest in a centralized advising appointment system to better serve students—no small task given the decentralized model and because it would require the colleges to change their processes. The Student Success Center saw this as an opportunity to offer up its services to the provost's office in moving this process along. Now, the person who oversees the new software is housed in the Student Success Center, which offers infrastructure and support for the process. Not only does this support the efforts of the various colleges and departments, but it allows the center to move forward with its cross-college advising initiatives. "We looked at it as a way to discover and create best practices for scheduling," says Moschella. "We can better serve the students when it's a shared service."

6: Use data—don't just collect it

Using good data is essential in guiding a retention strategy, monitoring students' progress, assessing program effectiveness, and directing decisions and resource allocations. A successful approach to student success depends on good data, and most academics will dismiss you unless you approach them with statistics that support your goals. Luckily, there are plenty available. Start with existing scholarship, some of it outlined in this paper, some available at sites such as the Education Department's Toolbox Revisited. Identify sources and repositories of data—on your campus, in your state, and elsewhere. Solicit the help of your institutional researchers to identify an institution-specific at-risk model. How will success be defined? A decrease in DFW rates? An increase in retention rates? Your institutional research department can help you find the resources you need to pull the right data and format the right reports.

Remember to use your data to move more confidently toward your student retention goals. Good data can help us focus our efforts on the most promising tactics and strategically allocate scarce resources. To start thinking about a data strategy to support your success and retention efforts, you might want to consider the following questions.

- What data are most important for understanding student persistence, learning, and success?

- What data governance structure is in place?

- Do we have access to timely, quality data that presents "one version of the truth"?

- How are data used for decision-making, program development, and resource allocation?

- How can technology facilitate relevant reports and records to help campus improve services to students?

- How can technology provide access to concise, graphical displays of point-in-time and trend data through dashboards and scorecards?

Delta State University

Delta State University's Student Success task force relies on the retention and data analysis working group to identify successful students, analyze patterns, and identify significant variables associated with success. "We use data to looks for trends—who drops out, who succeeds," says Riddle. They use the information to intervene proactively. For example, if students in a certain major are more likely to drop out, the university makes sure they get extra support. "Data can be a useful tool, but you have to know what you want to collect and how you want to use it," says McAdams. Using data to identify need, Delta State University identified 10 students who were close to graduating but hadn't registered for the following term. The university contacted the students and learned that, for a variety of reasons, the students' financial difficulties were going to jeopardize their graduation. With $27,000, the university created a Retention Success scholarship and disbursed the funds. It made a significant difference: four students of the ten graduated that semester and another four are back on track.

North Iowa Area Community College

Like many institutions, North Iowa Area Community College (NIACC) had a retention solution in place but needed additional information to help it be more effective. Additionally, a recent report from the Higher Learning Commission stated that the college was data-rich but information-poor. As part of their revitalized retention efforts, the college enlisted Ellucian Technology Management Services. To give the college more insight into their data, Ellucian delivered a prototype retention dashboard. "The data indicated that prompt follow-up and contact increases retention and student success," says Tom Hausmann, chief information officer at Ellucian. The new dashboard revealed the importance of engaging with students; personal contact from the Student Services team increased retention by 20 percent.

Data also found that the college was only contacting 50 percent of the students identified as a retention case. In response, the college revised its methods for assigning and working retention cases. "Assigning students to counselors through rules and automatically directing cases leverages the Colleague® Retention Alert functionality not used before at NIACC," says Greg Bailey, enterprise applications director. "This new approach will get more students back on track and help them continue their education." For each new case, the dashboard displays a photo of the student, contact information, and a one-click link to their cell phones—so counselors can take immediate action. And the dynamic, real-time dashboard lets executives monitor retention efforts on the fly by analyzing communication history and different cohorts.

Conclusion

It is not easy to achieve sustainable and measurable strides in improving student learning, success, and persistence-to-degree completion. However, such organizations as The Education Trust and The Aspen Institute have demonstrated that colleges and universities can make significant improvements and outperform other institutions through an intentional and concerted approach.

And the institutions highlighted in this paper also serve as exemplary models of the best practices of establishing a shared vision of student success, focusing on what successful students do, determining an intervention strategy, starting small, building bridges, and using data in meaningful and actionable ways.

Ellucian student success portfolio

Student success is one of the most visible markers of your institution's ability to meet increased demands for higher levels of accountability. Given the increased scrutiny being brought to bear on student outcomes today, designing a coordinated institution-wide approach that supports your strategic objectives, breaks down silos, and recognizes the right tactics to identify and support at-risk students is imperative.

Ellucian provides the broadest portfolio of software and services in the industry to support your student success initiatives. For more information about how Ellucian can support your student success efforts, visit us online at **http://www.ellucian. com/Software/Student-Success/**. For specific information on Ellucian services that support designing a coordinated plan like those highlighted in this paper, please visit us online at **http://www. ellucian.com/Software/Ellucian-Student-Success- and-Retention-Planning-Services/**.

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Ellucian is the world's leading provider of software and services higher education institutions need to help students succeed. More than 2,400 institutions in 40 countries rely on Ellucian to help enable the mission of higher education for over 18 million students. Ellucian provides student information systems (SIS), finance and HR, recruiting, retention, analytics and advancement software solutions. With more than 1,400 institutions subscribing to Ellucian's cloud services and SaaS offerings, the company is one of the largest providers of cloud-based solutions. Ellucian also supports the higher education

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