New report builds case for a set of strategies to help community college students graduate

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Community colleges now have solid data on which strategies work best to help students get to graduation. While more colleges are using those techniques, far too few students are benefiting from them.

That has been a central theme of three studies from the Center for Community College Student Engagement, all of which seek to investigate the use of "high-impact practices" to boost student success. The center released its third and final [1] piece of the project [2] on Thursday.

The new research adds to the case for 13 specific practices that work particularly well (see box). Some can have a big impact on student retention and graduation rates.

Take the elimination [3] of late registration for courses. The report found that students who reported registering for all courses before the meeting of the first class were four times more likely than their peers to stay enrolled between semesters and 11 times more likely to not drop out over a year.

Yet only 5 percent of students in the survey were required to register for all their courses before they began and actually did so.

"There's a lot of work to be done to be where we want to be on completion rates," said Evelyn Waiwaiole, the center's director.

One key, as the center has shown in previous studies, is applying retention-oriented policies to many or even all students. Kay McClenney, who this year retired as the center's director, often said "students don't do optional."

However, Waiwaiole said the community college sector still has many cracks for students to slip through, even with required programs. "I don't think we really get what 'all' means," she said.

Going big with success policies need not be difficult or painful, said Waiwaiole. Some, like ending late registration, are "low-hanging fruit." In that case colleges can create new, shorter-term courses to keep from shutting out late-registering students and losing their tuition dollars as well as enrollment-related government support.

Most of the other strategies can feature similar protections, said Waiwaiole. But some of the

practices are more unavoidably expensive. One is the creation of new "learning communities," which feature the linking up of courses that groups of students take together.

Colleges don't need to try all 13 to be successful, Waiwaiole said. They should pick the ideas that work best for their campus cultures. The report can help them make those choices.

"That's how you can use this data," she said, by asking, "What's the culture like in tandem with what does the data say?"

Paradox of Choice

The new research features the most in-depth information the center has produced on student-success initiatives.

The first report [4] in the series, released in February 2012, sought to describe the most promising efforts to improve completion. It was followed by an October 2013 report [5] that tracked how students who participate in those programs fare in comparison to those who do not.

Both studies drew from several national surveys of community college students, including the center's flagship survey -- the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE).

This latest research, however, went deeper than surveys by linking up individual student transcripts from 12 community colleges with the students' survey answers. As a result, it tracked student attitudes and outcomes alike.

High-Impact Practices

Academic goal setting and planning

Orientation

Accelerated or fast-track developmental education

First-year experience

Student success course

Learning community

Experiential learning beyond the classroom

Tutoring

Supplemental instruction

Assessment and placement

Registration before classes begin
Class attendance

Alert and intervention

"It's the most complex work we've ever done," said Waiwaiole.

The report looks at how the 13 most promising student-success practices affected three key metrics: students' completion of one remedial education course, how likely students with remedial needs were to complete an introductory course in English or math, and student "persistence" in college.

All 13 led to improvements. And even some seemingly small changes paid off in big ways. For example, the study found that students in remedial math courses were almost three times more likely to complete those courses if their instructor clearly explained the class attendance policy. The good news with that strategy is that fully 98 percent of students said all their instructors already do this.

On the flip side, only 6 percent of surveyed students with remedial needs participated in learning communities. Those who did were roughly 2.6 times more likely to complete a remedial English course.

The report pushes hard on community colleges to give students clearer "pathways" to graduation. For a full decade the center has been producing research showing that students do better if colleges "make engagement inescapable."

That means requiring academic support and tutoring. And the center has said that a more structured approach should include cuts to the dozens of choices of majors and hundreds -- or even thousands

-- of course options that can confuse and overwhelm students.

"Current brain science research shows that people experience anxiety and frustration when they face too many choices," the report said, and as a result "are more likely either to make poor decisions or to retreat from the situation altogether."

Several community colleges have made progress in reducing the clutter students face. The report singles out Miami Dade College for a program, begun in 2011, to create more structured academic pathways. Faculty, staff and administrators redesigned curriculums as part of the project, by streamlining course sequences and making sure degree requirements are designed to help students transfer to four-year colleges without losing credits.

Any effort to narrow students' choices requires strong academic advising, said Waiwaiole. For Miami Dade that meant a direct contact for all of its more than 10,000 first-time students who arrive each fall. The students talk with pre-college advisers, complete an online orientation and have a mandatory in-person pre-enrollment orientation, where advisers help them create personalized academic plans. Advisers stick with students throughout their first semester. And full-time faculty members take over as coaches and mentors when students pass the 25-percent-complete milestone on their way to a credential.

Miami Dade isn't alone in this sort of heavy-duty redesign of the student experience. But Waiwaiole said the going is slow across the two-year sector.

"There are a lot of good initiatives out there," she said, pointing to Achieving the Dream and Completion By Design, among others. "But change, and I mean cultural change, doesn't happen overnight."

Community Colleges [6]

Links:
[1] http://www.ccsse.org/docs/Matter_of_Degrees_3.pdf
[2] http://www.ccsse.org/center/initiatives/highimpact/index.cfm
[3] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/03/05/college-southern-nevada-seeks-boost-retention-ending-late-registration
[4] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/02/02/academic-support-offerings-go-unused-community-colleges
[5] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/10/17/community-college-completion-strategies-lack-scale-report-finds
[6] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/community_colleges