

GOING DEEP

Learning from Campuses That Share Responsibility for Student Success

Nearly two years of intensive research into the daily work of twenty institutions may finally put to rest any doubt that building cross-campus collaborations to facilitate student success is essential.

BY JILLIAN KINZIE AND GEORGE D. KUH

AFTER YEARS OF DISCUSSION about the importance of building cross-campus collaborations to help students achieve, little doubt should remain that that collaboration is important. If any uncertainties linger, a team of researchers who recently completed a national study hopes to lay them to rest. Who did the team study? Institutions with higher-than-predicted student engagement and graduation rates. What did they find? In part, that sharing responsibility for student success really does matter.

Team members of Project DEEP (Documenting Effective Educational Practice) spent almost two years immersing themselves in the daily work of twenty campuses. The institutions studied during the project are small, large, urban, rural, historically black, majority white, commuter and residential, highly selective, and not

selective at all. Their common denominator is that they all have participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and have scored better than predicted across some or all of this survey's five benchmarks of effective educational practice: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student interaction with faculty members, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment. All twenty also enjoy a graduation rate that is higher than predicted after taking into account relevant student and institutional characteristics. The Project DEEP team, working through the NSSE Institute, used student engagement as a proxy for quality because engagement has been shown to be the best predictor of student success, after controlling for past academic performance and preparation. (See the Additional Resources at the end of this article for more information.)

To discover what these high-performing institutions are doing to add value to their students' experiences, Project DEEP team members reviewed hundreds of documents and Web sites and, in groups of three to five, conducted two multiple-day visits to each campus. Team members visited classrooms and laboratories, observed faculty and staff meetings and student events, and talked with more than 2,700 people across these campuses, many of them more than once. More information about the project and research team is available at <http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/deep/main.htm>.

Major findings from DEEP will be described in forthcoming reports. Here, we focus on one of the central qualities common to these twenty institutions: a widely shared sense of responsibility for educational quality and student success. Four conditions stood out: leadership, partnerships between academic and student affairs personnel, student agency, and what the team defined as "the power of one."

LEADERSHIP

AT SOME OF THE INSTITUTIONS, the president leads the charge for student success initiatives; at others, the provost or dean of students is the key player; and at still others, faculty members are the champions of change. What is common among high-performing schools is that a mix of administrators, faculty and staff members, and students work together to set direction and to create and maintain student success efforts.

Strong Senior Leadership. Whether they came from another institution to take over leadership or were homegrown, all presidents at the DEEP schools held academic positions prior to their presidential appointments. None came directly from positions outside higher education, although a few, such as California State University Monterey Bay's Peter Smith (former Vermont state senator, lieutenant governor, and member of the U.S. Congress) were in other public service positions at some point.

A strong sense of purpose characterizes each of these leaders. Longwood University (Virginia) president Patti Cormier, for example, inspired the campus to develop its Citizen Leader for the Common Good emphasis. Cormier, a self-described reformist, volunteers in the local community and on civic boards and developed several structural links to bring academic and student affairs units together. The vice president of student affairs, for example, reports to the provost and serves on the tenure committee.

At the University of Michigan, creating an undergraduate experience on par with graduate and profes-

sional programs has been the focus of senior administrators, including the president, provost, and academic deans. In his introduction to the *Report of the President's Commission on the Undergraduate Experience*, former president Lee Bollinger summarized the "Michigan Way" of pursuing academic excellence at the undergraduate level: "[It is] my belief that the very health of a university, broadly speaking, is connected to how it cares for its students, and perhaps especially its undergraduate students because of their special vulnerability to being neglected. . . . Even the character and quality of the research emanating from the institution will depend upon the degree to which we feel a desire to nurture, educationally, students into the life of the mind" (p. 3). Since this commitment to an excellent undergraduate experience was made, resources have been expended to create the Intergroup Relations program and intergroup dialogues, the Arts of Citizenship Program, and the Ginsberg Center for Community Service and Learning.

Senior administrators at the University of Texas El Paso (UTEP), led by longtime president Diana Natalicio, have guided the evolution of the institution into one of the largest Hispanic-serving universities in the country (see the interview with Natalicio in this issue). UTEP leaders are guided by the principle that "talent is everywhere; opportunity is not" and the belief that access and excellence are not competing goals. New faculty members are recruited with these notions in mind and hear them throughout faculty orientation.

The presence of a provost described by faculty as "extraordinary" and universally trusted seems to partially explain the success of the University of Kansas. The provost, David Shulenburger, has been providing a cultural thread and steady leadership over his twenty years at the campus, first as a faculty member in business, then as a department chair, and later in central administration. Faculty and staff members see him as the major force behind the effort to balance the university's research and teaching mission.

Fayetteville State University (FSU, North Carolina) Chancellor Emeritus Willis McLeod, a vocal advocate of undergraduate excellence, wrote a position paper entitled *Linking Retention and Academic Performance: The Freshman Year Initiative*, in which he asked FSU faculty and staff to increase their efforts to improve student learning and success:

At Fayetteville State University, "total personal development" certainly includes academics, and our students' intellectual development, but it also includes their psychological, social, and cultural development as well. We must strive to engage students, not only in the

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classroom, but in a variety of social and cultural events outside of the classroom. . . . We must help students clarify their values, as well as their personal and professional goals. Students need our assistance in understanding what they can reasonably expect of FSU, and what is expected of them as university students. Most importantly, we must instill in students a “no-fail” attitude. By this, I mean that we need to help students develop the self-confidence and commitment to excellence that will help them see that success is within their reach, and that failure is not an option. [p. 1]

As a result of the chancellor’s charge, FSU’s University College, first-year seminar, and intrusive academic and career advising programs were created, and increases in student retention at the institution have been realized.

Distributed Leadership. In addition to having individuals with a sense of purpose in formal leadership roles, DEEP schools employ people in many corners of the institution who help establish and sustain the conditions that foster student success. Leaders within the institution share mutual goals that are well defined and

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place student success at the center of the work.

The goal of enriching the first-year experience motivated faculty members at Sewanee: The University of the South (Tennessee) to develop that institution’s First Year Program. The administration dedicated resources to the development of curricular activities, including hosting guest speakers and off-campus trips.

The Common Intellectual Experience at Ursinus College (Pennsylvania) emerged from discussions with faculty and administrators interested in strengthening the institution’s liberal arts mission. The dean of the college is described as a highly respected, “gentle” leader who encourages faculty to discuss their ideas for strengthening the liberal arts mission.

Leaders at DEEP schools perform what Peter Senge describes as the “subtler and more important tasks. . . . [They] are designers, stewards, and teachers. They are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models—that is, they are responsible for learning” (p. 340).

ACADEMIC AND STUDENT AFFAIRS PARTNERSHIPS

AS AT MANY OTHER colleges and universities, student affairs staff members at DEEP schools assume primary responsibility for orienting students to the institution and for administering programs and services to meet student academic and social needs outside the classroom. At DEEP institutions, student affairs staff work in partnership with faculty members in academic affairs to discharge these duties. Moreover, on these campuses, a strong sense of respect exists among faculty, academic administrators, and student affairs staff. Collaboration among all parts of the institution flows from a sense of purpose about what needs to be accomplished and from a widely held understanding of the institution’s operating principles.

One administrator at Miami University (MU, Ohio) described the “amazing collaboration” between the academic and student affairs divisions that has resulted in efforts such as the First-Year Experience and Choice Matters initiatives. As one faculty member observed, “It demonstrates a fundamental commitment to undergraduates, and an appreciation for the broad spectrum of their learning experiences.” In MU’s Student Affairs Division, collaboration with academic affairs is a high priority.

Faculty and administrators at The Evergreen State College (Washington) are openly appreciative of the work of student affairs staff in admissions, counseling, health, advising, orientation, residence life, and other areas. Evergreen’s faculty members also provide students with support and advice on personal issues as well as academic matters, while student affairs staff members formally contribute to the “teaching across significant differences” foci of the college. Student affairs staff members are present in the Core, the Coordinated Studies Programs for first-year students, as Core Connectors (in-class process observers). These Core Connectors teach students how to monitor their own behavior and that of their peers.

Three decades of stable senior student affairs leadership at Longwood University is credited with fostering a high level of integration of students’ academic and cocurricular experiences. Student development outcomes associated with cocurricular experiences are mapped against the institution’s seven goals for learning and are regularly assessed. Undergraduate residence hall assistants are selected, in part, for their understanding of the university’s educational mission. Student affairs staff and faculty teach the first-year Longwood seminar, which is administered both in student and academic affairs. Provost Norman Bregman indicates that the links between student affairs and academic functions are the strongest he has ever seen.

At Alverno College (Wisconsin), student services staff are self-described as “partners in developing a community of learners.” The 2002 Student Services annual

report devotes three single-spaced pages to documenting partnerships between student services and other Alverno offices, programs, and local agencies that enact the college’s emphasis on holistic student development. According to one staff member, “We see ourselves as an extension of the classroom” by helping students translate their learning into different settings and reflect on their experiences outside the classroom. Staff members have explicitly identified desired cocurricular outcomes and routinely provide feedback to students related to these criteria.

After Ursinus College approved its new general education curriculum and related requirements, the student affairs staff focused on how they might contribute to the new curricular goals and forge tighter connections with the academic program. One priority was improving the residence hall environments for study and academic collaboration. Residence life staff members now receive academic warning slips from the registrar alerting them to students who are struggling in their courses. Staff members compare this information with feedback from resident advisers in an attempt to identify issues associated with a student’s difficulty. Advisers will communicate directly with RAs to learn more about a student’s out-of-class life in an effort to gain a better understanding of factors that might be contributing to a student’s poor academic performance. Faculty advisers are notified if students are subject to significant disciplinary action. The goal is to have in place safety nets for students who face academic difficulties.

Credit, as well as responsibility, for student successes is shared at DEEP schools. For example, the vice president for student affairs at the University of Texas at El Paso conveyed this in explaining a recent reorganization that resulted in a shift of line responsibility for academic advising from student affairs to a unit in academic affairs: “I gave up designs about territory long ago. Yes, one might look at this move as a loss for student affairs, but now we are better partners working to support students.”

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STUDENT AGENCY

DEEP SCHOOLS create structures for shifting responsibility for the student experience to the students themselves. At Alverno and Evergreen, the organization of the academic program is key. At Kansas, Miami, and Wheaton, campus governance structures and processes require student participation. At Longwood and Sewanee, students are largely responsible for cocurricular activities. At most DEEP schools, students' behavioral norms have evolved toward taking greater responsibility for the experiences they have during college.

Students Teaching Students. At Wofford College (South Carolina), students teach other students through individual tutoring, formal student presentations in seminars and community events, and informal out-of-class academic assistance. Student preceptors work as partners with the faculty and one another in the first-year humanities-science learning communities. Though preceptors can earn either academic credit or a modest stipend, most consider what they learn the most important reward. "It's changed my perspective about teaching and faculty. . . . For the first time I can tell if a professor is really prepared. . . . Now I am better at identifying where other professors are headed in class discussions and I can be more involved," explained one of the preceptors. Another preceptor noted, "It's allowed me to be metacognitive about how I am as a student, and who I am in the classroom." A third preceptor recalled one incident: "I told one student who was doing poorly in the class, 'I saw you out last night, and you're not prioritizing.'" The presence of preceptors has encouraged other students and faculty members to perform at higher levels.

At Evergreen, each student's individual academic experience is designed by the student in conversation with faculty and staff members. Each term, every student enrolls in sixteen-credit, interdisciplinary Coordinated Studies Programs that replace the typical collection of courses adding up to prescribed academic

majors. Over their college career, Evergreen students are responsible for deciding which collection of programs meets their personal educational goals. In addition, students are expected to hold one another accountable for the quality of their collective learning experience. A faculty member explained why this is important: "The learning of the group depends on the whole. Each individual depends on these elements that don't come from the faculty" but from other students. One student told us, "You realize that you're as much the teacher as anyone else in the room." A senior concluded that "you have to know what you're talking about if you want to teach someone else."

Sharing Responsibility for Campus Governance. At the University of Maine, Farmington (UMF), student participation in campus governance is an explicit institutional goal. This participation is intended to teach students decision-making skills and how to understand issues affecting their learning. Meaningful involvement with faculty members, staff members, and peers helps connect students to the campus, which has been shown to increase student satisfaction and the likelihood that they will persist to graduation. Students who participate in governance offer perspectives that differ from those of faculty and staff. One student related, "The committee I was on was selecting an architect. I didn't like the designs of one of the firms and we spent two hours talking about my concerns." Another observed, "They know this is our school and they want to know how we want the university to be run." A senior administrator agreed: "Students have a different mindset and we know it's important to tap into that."

At Wheaton College (Massachusetts), students described themselves as "empowered people making important decisions." Students sit on a variety of college committees—the Student-Trustee Liaison Committee, the Educational Policy Committee, the Budget Advisory Committee, search committees, and task forces. Student representatives were observed discussing proposed changes to the curriculum during an Educational Policy Committee meeting. These and other stu-

dents planned and conducted a two-week “academic challenge” to introduce the new curriculum to the student body, to explain how various parts of the curriculum work together, and to generate enthusiasm for its implementation. The challenge included new curriculum trivia and culminated with a parody of the popular television show “Survivor” in which the most valuable player of each team competed for a trip to the Bahamas.

Students at Gonzaga University (Washington) were vocal participants in discussions about managing enrollment growth on the campus. A concern for academic quality and for safeguarding the core values of the university’s Jesuit tradition fueled intense interest among students, who formed alliances with faculty and staff members to make decisions about the campus’ future.

At the University of Kansas, a faculty member serves as president and a student serves as vice president of the fifty-member elected University Council, the forum for grassroots issues—for example, a tuition enhancement plan (most money from tuition increase went to new faculty hires and classroom improvements, which was supported by student leaders) and a course repeat policy. The University Council’s student vice president traditionally presides over meetings when the faculty chair is absent. A similar arrangement is in place in the University Senate and on many other campus committees.

THE POWER OF ONE

ALL DEEP COLLEGES and universities employ individuals who informally add a special dimension to the student experience. Their presence encourages their colleagues to perform at higher levels, and they routinely energize those with whom they interact—students, faculty, staff, and others. This person may be a revered librarian, a faculty member with a legendary concern for first-year students, or a director of outdoor activities admired by faculty and students. Regardless of their formal role, these individuals make a significant contribution to student success, showing the tremendous difference one person can make in the life of a campus. Miss Rita at Wofford College exemplifies this type of individual.

Miss Rita runs the Acorn Café, a small coffee shop located in the Milliken Science Center. In one forty-five-minute period, she was observed warmly greeting nearly everyone by name, encouraging some, cajoling others, and freely dispensing her own brand of advice about academic performance and social life. She directed one student who had performed poorly on a recent test to “go and see the faculty member. [He’s a] good person [and] he’ll be glad to speak with you.” Of another student, she asked, “Going to the next home game?” The student was unsure, and Miss Rita sternly reminded her that it was important to be there “because the boys

Schools That Go DEEP

THE TWENTY DEEP institutions represent the diversity of baccalaureate-granting institutions. Nine are private, eleven are public. Some are large research-intensive universities; others focus exclusively on undergraduate education. Some are residential; others enroll substantial numbers of commuting and part-time students. One has fewer than 700 undergraduate students (Sweet Briar College), while others enroll more than 20,000 (University of Kansas, University of Michigan). Two are historically black colleges and universities—Fayetteville State University and Winston-Salem State University. Two are Hispanic serving institutions—California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB), and the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). Two are women’s colleges—Alverno and

Sweet Briar; one is a men’s college—Wabash.

At all but a few, the range of student ability and academic preparation is substantial. While standardized test scores place the University of Michigan and Miami University (Ohio) among the more selective public universities in the country, other institutions, such as Fayetteville State University and the University of Texas at El Paso, open their doors to substantial numbers of students who are underprepared for college level work. The private liberal arts colleges in the study practice selective admissions to varying degrees. Commuter and part-time students are numerous at some of these institutions, such as UTEP, California State University, Monterey Bay, and George Mason. Others enroll almost an entirely resi-

dential, full-time student body, including the University of Maine at Farmington, Macalester, University of Michigan, and Wabash.

DEEP PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

- Alverno College
- California State Univ., Monterey Bay
- The Evergreen State College
- Fayetteville State University
- George Mason University
- Gonzaga University
- Longwood University
- Macalester College
- Miami University (Ohio)
- Sewanee: The University of the South
- Sweet Briar College
- University of Kansas
- University of Maine at Farmington
- University of Michigan
- University of Texas at El Paso
- Ursinus College
- Wabash College
- Wheaton College (Massachusetts)
- Winston-Salem State University
- Wofford College

need our support.” “And wear black!” she admonished. (Black is one of the two school colors.) Miss Rita explained that her role at the institution is to let students know she cares for them, so she takes time to “give them a little love when they stop by.”

Miss Rita is one among many at Wofford and the other DEEP schools who are in the company of students as much or more than faculty members. Their interest and concern help to create a supportive campus climate, a key ingredient in educational quality and student success.

CONCLUSION

DEEP SCHOOLS are distinctive in part because large numbers of people feel student success is a shared responsibility. Each of the twenty campuses has one or more key leaders or senior faculty members who regularly remind their colleagues about institutional aspirations and learning-centered priorities. They articulate core operating values and principles, select new colleagues who share these values and principles, and consistently enact them in making decisions. They model collaboration through their actions and their words.

Those who have the most contact with students—faculty members and student affairs professionals—generally work well together, in large part because they enjoy mutual respect based on competence and an affinity for the institution’s mission and culture. They work together to empower students. Equally important, hundreds of individuals on a daily basis make countless small gestures that create and sustain a caring community of support for students. Sharing responsibility for educational quality and student success is woven into the tapestry of educationally effective institutions.

NOTES

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