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Five essential principles for improving student outcomes

Student success for higher education

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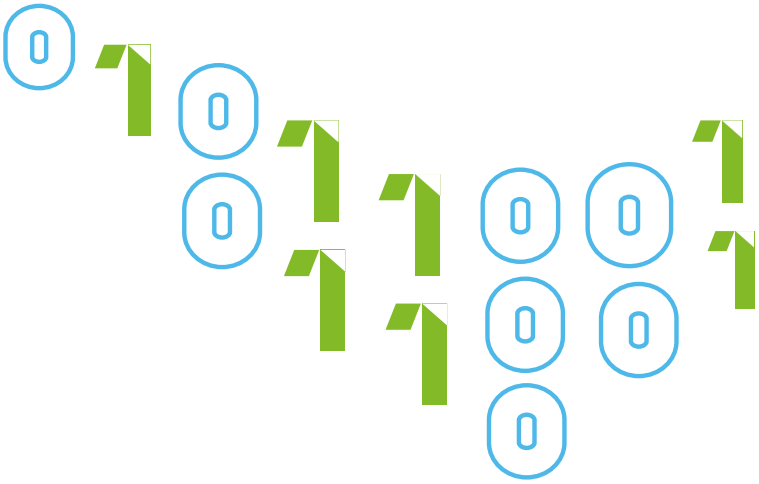

Not long ago, the potential of predictive analytics to improve student success—specifically persistence and graduation rates—was all the buzz in education technology. The premise was appealing: Colleges and universities could analyze vast volumes of student data to pinpoint where an institution is most likely to struggle with student success.

Company after company was founded—and funded—to realize this potential; some are now household names in higher education. Over the past several years, offerings from these companies have matured, refined through real world application into quite sophisticated and flexible tools. Capable of adapting over time to the nuances and unique characteristics of an institution, analytics tools can now provide very instructive insights.

Incremental progress can lead to major change

We know that even incremental improvements in retention and completion can have a profound positive impact on students' long-term earnings potential and career aspirations—as well as the economic health of the institution making the improvements. The median household income in the United States in 2016 was $54K for people with some college but no degree; that figure jumps to $90K for people with a bachelor's degree.[1] A recent study of 1,669 colleges and universities revealed roughly $16.5 billion in lost revenue from attrition, ranging from approximately $10K to $102M.[2] One stark reminder that graduation rates remain a challenge: Roughly 39 percent of American adults have a four-year college degree, a stubborn statistic that has barely moved in the past decade.[3]

In "College Student Success: Using Predictive Modeling and Actionable Intelligence with a Faculty-Centered Information Portal to Improve Student Academic Performance," a dissertation by Andy Clark, now a Specialist Leader with Deloitte Consulting LLP, a model for leveraging analytics for student success programs is outlined.[4] The approach is particularly intriguing because the university described in the paper focused on both crucial aspects of analytics:

1) ***Rigor*** around data and around the intelligence that can be gleaned from analyzing a variety of datasets that would be relatively meaningless independent of one another.

2) The ***action*** side of student success.

In other words, they did not just apply analytics to student data for insights into what was happening. They went through the hard work of doing something meaningful with the information to ultimately nudge a student to take a particular set of actions—an instant message regarding the criticality of a particular test, a push to an adviser to proactively reach out on a financial aid topic, or simply encouragement delivered electronically during a particularly challenging course—coupled with consistent, persistent engagement with the student through a variety of channels to develop a pattern of success over time.

Another important aspect of the work was the principle of incrementalism: allowing small wins and success to demonstrate the value of the solution, then reinvesting that success into scaling the solution across the enterprise. Technology in this case was not the silver bullet; it was simply the fuel for a series of changes instituted at an enterprise level that changed the way the university engaged with students to improve outcomes. This required strong and consistent leadership.

Over the past decade, many US colleges and universities have invested in tools to address student success, particularly retention and completion metrics. Unfortunately, outcomes and student engagement measures show little improvement. We believe the primary reason for the lack of real progress is that institutions generally have a misplaced focus on the tool, with inadequate emphasis on fundamental changes in actions taken. Reforms are generally a great deal harder to achieve: They typically require changes to student services and advising that are rooted in decades-long cultural norms—changes that in many cases are beyond the existing capacity of colleges and universities. Given the shared governance model prevalent in higher education, this equates to a leadership challenge that many schools are ill equipped to tackle.

Five essential principles for improving student outcomes

The good news is that we are seeing solid strategies for achieving meaningful change. Five key principles can help presidents and provosts move forward and improve outcomes:

1. **Student success should become central to the mission of your institution.**
   Many student success or retention initiatives start in a specific school or within an individual administrative unit, such as information technology, institutional research, or advising, rarely with high-level, institution-wide buy-in from faculty across departments or colleges. **Student success should be a core element of institutional strategy at the president and provost level.** Internally and externally, communications should highlight student success as a fundamental component of the institution's strategic mission—and long-term funding should reflect this prioritization. A sustainable plan should include models showing return on investment at an institutional level. As the process scales, revenue increases from retention improvement allow greater investment; for states with performance-based funding systems, this becomes a compounding effect.

2. **Action taken is as important as the analytical insight.**
   Too many institutions fall into the trap of seeing the tool as the solution. Planning how to use the insights the tool enables is equally important—how and when improvements will be delivered. **For example, staff members expected to enable the action phase should be included in the overall architecture planning of any student success initiative.** They should also be included in the tool selection process, for their input and to reduce the risk of having staff disenfranchised and skeptical. While discrete departments across an institution can influence student success, designing and implementing a comprehensive strategy means moving beyond many ideas stakeholders have about what drives the strategy. Leadership should consistently communicate a vision of student success—this can in turn effectively align resources to support defined goals.

3. **Understand the value and limits of technology to address student success.**
   Tools do not come with built-in strategy and tactical plans; they merely provide insights. **From the outset, there should be a clear understanding of what the technology can and will do and what will be expected of an institutional staff.** Keys to a successful initiative include:

   - Close evaluation of existing staff members' strengths and needs for skills development
   - Comprehensive review of all current processes related to students (what are the current business processes and how could the technology enhance these interactions?)
   - A future-state design that marries technology with new ways to drive engagement with students at the applicable moments

Many institutions already have programs and initiatives in place to support student success. The issues tend to be around making it easy for students to find these programs and then accurately measuring and evaluating the impact. Both will be critical as you build a more strategic approach to student retention and progression.

Take a phased approach: Start by student type, college, or program of study, so you can be focused with interventions and strategies. If you can show early success and significant improvements with target groups and then communicate this success to other parts of the campus, you can more effectively grow a student success initiative in scalable ways. Actionable insights aligned with tactical plans (i.e., playbooks) can lead to significant change.

4. **People investments are as important as technology investments.** A coordinated ecosystem of human touchpoints—academic advising, career counselors, tutors—all play an important role in student success. The history of academic advising in higher education is, like many other functions, typically siloed in departments with little consistency across campus. A leading practice for improving student success in this area is to make advising a more centralized function, with standards for how insights are leveraged. While advising resources do not necessarily have to be moved out of departments completely, you will likely need some degree of centralization of advising at the institutional level. This likely means an increase in advising resources, as well as making the resources more accessible and available. It should also entail the deployment of a uniform set of tools and dashboards across the entire student success team. Institutions should plan on investing in training and staff development related to student success.

5. **Improving student success does not equal reduction in quality.** You may hear your faculty push back on student success initiatives citing concerns that it will reduce overall quality and trigger an overall drop in the institution's ranking and performance. Do not be drawn into this argument. Instead, make the case that quality and student success are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually *reinforcing*, provided there are high standards in place from both an admissions and an academic rigor perspective.

As we collaborate with clients and strategic partners on student success initiatives, all five of these principles continually prove important. Mastering only one or two of them in isolation will likely not lead to meaningful improvement; it is smart to start small, but design for the academic enterprise. You may be surprised by how quickly reluctant stakeholders jump on board once you demonstrate success.

While technology sounds complicated, it is actually the less difficult aspect of this extremely complex problem. Institutional leadership, change management, and action elements of the solution are the most difficult to master. To make meaningful progress in an area so vital to our long-term advancement as a society, all of these elements should be addressed with equal vigor.

Deloitte can help. Our specialists work with university and college leadership to help students succeed—raising retention and graduation rates. By looking at current and upcoming trends in higher education, we help to strategize more effective ways of reaching the students of today as well as recruiting the students of tomorrow. For more information, please visit www.deloitte.com/us/higher-ed-student.

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Endnotes

1. Statista, "Median household income in the United States in 2016, by educational attainment of householder (in US dollars)," https://www.statista.com/statistics/233301/median-household-income-in-the-united-states-by-education/.
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3. Kyla Calvert Mason, "Percentage of Americans with college degrees rises, paying for degrees tops financial challenges," PBS News Hour, April 22, 2014, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/education/percentage-americans-college-degrees-rises-paying-degrees-tops-financial-challenges.
4. Andy Clark, "College Student Success: Using Predictive Modeling and Actionable Intelligence with a Faculty Centered Information Portal to Improve Student Academic Performance," Valdosta, GA: University Press, 2016.

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