Student success by design
Five high-impact, low-cost ideas for college leaders

Jen Tutak and Allan Ludgate

THE DELOITTE CENTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION EXCELLENCE
How can colleges and universities prioritize student success? Here are five high-impact, low-cost strategies academic leaders can use to improve student retention and graduation rates.

EVERY YEAR ACROSS the United States, a significant number of students fail to complete their college degrees.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 26 percent of students who entered college in the fall of 2016 did not return to any institution in the second year; only 61 percent returned to their starting institution. The debate over student debt frequently overlooks these students, who often take out loans but leave college short of attaining a postsecondary credential. Saddled with debt, and without the benefit of the increased earning power that comes with a degree, they face a difficult struggle. They are also the most likely to default on their student loans—according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, defaults are most common among students with the lowest debt burdens. Among those with less than US$5,000 in debt, one in three defaulted on their loans.

Furthermore, the National Center for Education Statistics estimates that among first-time, full-time students who started work toward a bachelor’s degree at a four-year institution in 2010, only 60 percent graduated within six years. At public institutions, the six-year graduation rate hovers around 59 percent; at private, nonprofit institutions, it’s 66 percent, while at private, for-profit institutions, it’s only 26 percent.

By any measure—whether it’s persistence from year one to year two, time to graduation, or the percentage of students who complete their degrees—many postsecondary institutions are falling short. Leaders at these institutions realize that they urgently need to improve outcomes. But progress has been slow, at least in part because leaders of these institutions believe that improving retention and graduation rates is a slow and expensive undertaking.

While it is true that institutions cannot transform student outcomes overnight, a number of high-impact, low-cost practices have been shown to get results. In this article, we identify five promising practices that colleges and universities can implement quickly without a significant investment. These suggestions emerged from research on student success conducted in collaboration with select institutions from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation’s Frontier Set. This is a group of colleges and universities, state educational systems, and supporting organizations that are working to increase student access and success while eliminating racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities in degree attainment.

Our partners in this research came from several institutions of higher learning. Here are some of the promising strategies being deployed on their campuses:

1. Open a campus dialogue on student success. Institution leaders can engage the full
3. Look for ways to demonstrate a student-centric culture. Though the myth persists that innovation is expensive, small moves can make a big difference. Hearing that families attending new student orientation tended to not commit their students to attend without a full course load, enrollment management at Delaware State University teamed up with academic affairs to prepopulate individual schedules that could be instantly linked with the name of an incoming freshman. This meant that everyone attending new student orientation received a personalized schedule and that led to the recruitment of one of the largest incoming classes in the university’s history. In another example, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro created a two-hour training for staff, faculty, and administrators, helping them better understand how to connect students in need to a wide variety of available resources. Those who complete the training receive a sticker to display in their workspace that says “UNCG Cares.” This low-cost, easy-to-deliver training program helped reinforce the idea that UNCG is committed to student success and signaled to students that they are welcome and that there are people available to help them. Meanwhile, Davidson County Community College conducted an inventory of students who had qualified, but never registered, for their credentials and awarded those students retroactive degrees.

2. Create a shared narrative and/or common scorecard to track progress. To help numerous stakeholders—including faculty, staff, administrators, community members, and board members—stay focused, it can be valuable to develop a common understanding of student success and how to measure efforts and results. The Student Success team at Davidson County Community College (North Carolina) designs a one-page “placemat” that is shared every fall with the entire campus detailing the primary campus efforts to promote student success, allowing each department to see how it fits into the bigger vision.

4. Reallocate resources. Since it will always be harder to obtain new dollars than to make more productive use of existing funds, leading institutions are both creative and rigorous in identifying resources to invest in student success. Two such approaches are zero-based budgeting, in which all expenses start from a “zero base” and must be analyzed and justified for each new period, and impact-first budgeting to review offerings through

Though the myth persists that innovation is expensive, small moves can make a big difference.
the lens of investment and impact. Once they have completed a process of examining structural inefficiencies, campuses can move dollars from more costly activities with lower impact to more productive uses. In December 2016, Delaware State University used this approach to drive an academic restructuring process that led to the unification of professional advisers under the Office of Student Success in September 2017, and the consolidation of five academic colleges into four in July 2018. These moves resulted in substantial savings in administrative costs, while improving services to students by reducing advising loads.

5. Leverage local resources. Effective local resources may already be available for partnership or redeployment. Davidson County Community College consulted the local bus timetable when scheduling its classes to make class schedules more convenient for commuters. Delaware State University asked one of its computer science professors, a data scientist, to take on the role of tracking student success metrics. Doing so led to the development of a powerful student success dashboard, and also allowed the university’s council of chairs to digitize and streamline about a dozen major academic administrative processes, providing students a more seamless experience in registration, change of majors, overloads, and importing credits from other institutions. Together, these changes resulted in increases to retention and graduation significant enough to keep the university on track to reach its 2020 key performance indicators without additional expenditures.

In Texas, San Jacinto College district partnered with key-area employers and industries to foster mutually advantageous workforce development in critical regional labor areas through curriculum support and an employment pipeline. This collaboration led to the construction of a new 145,000 sq. ft. state-of-the-art petroleum-chemical building that includes a working glycol processing unit. With input from industry partners, classrooms and labs were designed to ensure that students acquire skills that allow them to move into waiting internships and graduate into high-demand careers.

Institutional transformation in the service of student success is both a marathon and a sprint. Though significant work may be required for long-term transformation, campuses can get started in ways that are relatively swift and inexpensive to execute. With millions of enrolled students already at risk for not completing—many of them low-income, underrepresented minority, and/or first generation—institions of higher learning urgently need interventions they can implement right now, to help as many students as possible achieve their educational and life goals.
About the authors

JEN TUTAK is a manager with Monitor Institute, Deloitte Services LP, where she focuses on higher education issues related to access and completion. Her work considers how business, government, and education can intersect and innovate to enable all individuals to be set up for success. Tutak holds graduate degrees from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, Harvard Graduate School of Education, and MIT Sloan School of Management, as well as an undergraduate degree from Dartmouth College.

ALLAN LUDGATE is a managing director with Monitor Institute, Deloitte Services LP. Ludgate works with schools, education nonprofits, public-private partnerships, funders, and leaders to create scalable, sustainable solutions that strengthen student pathways “from cradle to career.” He leads a group that’s working to boost educational attainment among low-income youth. Ludgate holds a BS from New York University and an MBA from New York University’s Leonard Stern School of Business.

Contacts

Jeffrey Bradfield  
National practice leader  
Higher education  
Principal  
Deloitte Consulting LLP  
+1 312 486 5230  
jbradfield@deloitte.com

Scott Friedman  
Principal  
Deloitte Consulting LLP  
+1 215 789 2753  
scottfriedman@deloitte.com

Roy Mathew  
Principal  
Deloitte Consulting LLP  
+1 408 704 4527  
rmathew@deloitte.com

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON IMPLEMENTING SUCCESS BY DESIGN, PLEASE CONTACT:

Allan Ludgate  
Managing director  
Monitor Institute by Deloitte  
Deloitte Services LP  
aludgate@deloitte.com  
+1 212 829 6123

Jen Tutak  
Manager  
Monitor Institute by Deloitte  
Deloitte Services LP  
jtutak@deloitte.com  
+1 617 437 3407
Student success by design: Five high-impact, low-cost ideas for college leaders

About the Deloitte Center for Higher Education Excellence

Higher education institutions confront a number of challenges, from dramatic shifts in sources of funding resulting from broader structural changes in the economy, to demands for greater accountability at all levels, to the imperative to increase effectiveness and efficiency through the adoption of modern technology. Deloitte's Center for Higher Education Excellence produces groundbreaking research to help colleges and universities navigate these challenges and reimagine how they achieve excellence in every aspect of the academy: teaching, learning, and research. Through forums and immersive lab sessions, we engage the higher education community collaboratively on a transformative journey, exploring critical topics, overcoming constraints, and expanding the limits of the art of the possible.

A recognized leader in the higher education space, Deloitte has solved complex problems with over 175 public and private higher education institutions nationwide. Deloitte's higher education team has experienced professionals and industry leaders that turn ideas into impact for your institution. Our professionals have solved some of the toughest higher education challenges for our clients, including operational and financial transformation, enterprise technology solutions, student experience redesign, and organizational and change management.