

Intentional Leadership: Engaged Inquiry and Meaningful Action Scaled to Achieve Outcomes that Advance Equity

By Dr. Matthew Campbell

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It was a great opportunity to speak as part of the NWCCU Annual Meeting and to be able to share a little bit about what Pierce College is doing to drive student success. This article is particularly focused on experiences at Pierce College, but with concepts that are, I believe, relevant and scalable to the full scope of accredited institutions.

For the session, I wanted to capture several elements that I believe are intertwined and essential with regard to how we move higher education in a positive direction for students. Ultimately, it centers on achieving mission in a way that advances equity, through education, for each of our communities of learners.

To start, it is important to note that Pierce College is two of the 34 community and technical colleges in Washington with a district that covers all of Pierce County, except for Tacoma and Gig Harbor, and a sizable program at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. It is also important to discuss the evolving focus of community colleges in order to convey how that focus is relevant to all higher education institutions.

Access & Beyond

Community College means access. And while that is absolutely true, over the last decade or so we have been quite intentional in shifting our focus to go beyond access as the defining characteristic of community colleges. While we remain “open access,” meaning that we have an essential mission to serve nearly everyone who walks into the college, we have shifted from a mission solely of access, to a mission not only of completion and success, but to *successful transition to what comes next*, whether that is directly to a career in the workforce or transfer to another higher education institution.

This expanded focus on successful transition has been framed as “Community College 3.0,” by Joshua Wyner, founder and executive director of the College Excellence Program at the Aspen Institute.¹ And he is exactly right: to do less is to fail miserably on the spirit and the fundamental purpose of the original “access agenda.” For access, unto itself, is meaningless without equal access to outcomes, which requires *equity* in how we serve students. Indeed, for our students most in need, access without completion and success can be harmful, resulting in lost time and wages in the workforce, lost time with family, debt from student loans, etc. Thus, we have shifted our mindset from one

¹ Wyner, Joshua. (2017). “Community College 3.0: The post completion agenda.” *Community College Leadership Blog* (4 April 2017). Raleigh, NC: Envisioning Excellence, NC State University.
<https://envisioningexcellence.ced.ncsu.edu/community-college-3-0-the-post-completion-agenda/>

that says, “Our doors are open, it’s up to you to succeed,” to one that says, “***Our doors are open and we share responsibility to help you succeed.***”

The shift of moving to, “...*we share responsibility to help you succeed,*” may sound like a minor tweak. In practice, it is a fundamental shift of institutional framing, a new way of looking at ourselves that echos Tia Brown McNair’s (vice president, diversity, equity, and student success, AAC&U) concept that we are committed to moving from a passive culture of expecting students to be “college-ready” to one of expecting that the college is “**student-ready.**”² To place all responsibility on students in an educational system that has so robustly failed students of color (as well as students who lack basic food and housing security) is to ignore institutional and societal racism that will continue to impact the future of American society and the world. This happens through systemic oppression of minds that have equal potential to solve humanity’s problems.

Put simply: to fail to support and advance equity in our educational systems is to reproduce systems of oppression that not only sustain, but *actually widen racial and social injustice*, leading to a breakdown of the very fabrics of the human experience.

Pierce College Snapshot

So, who is Pierce College? The following image is a great overview of Pierce circa 2017-2018. Each data point helps draw a picture of what Pierce “looks like.”

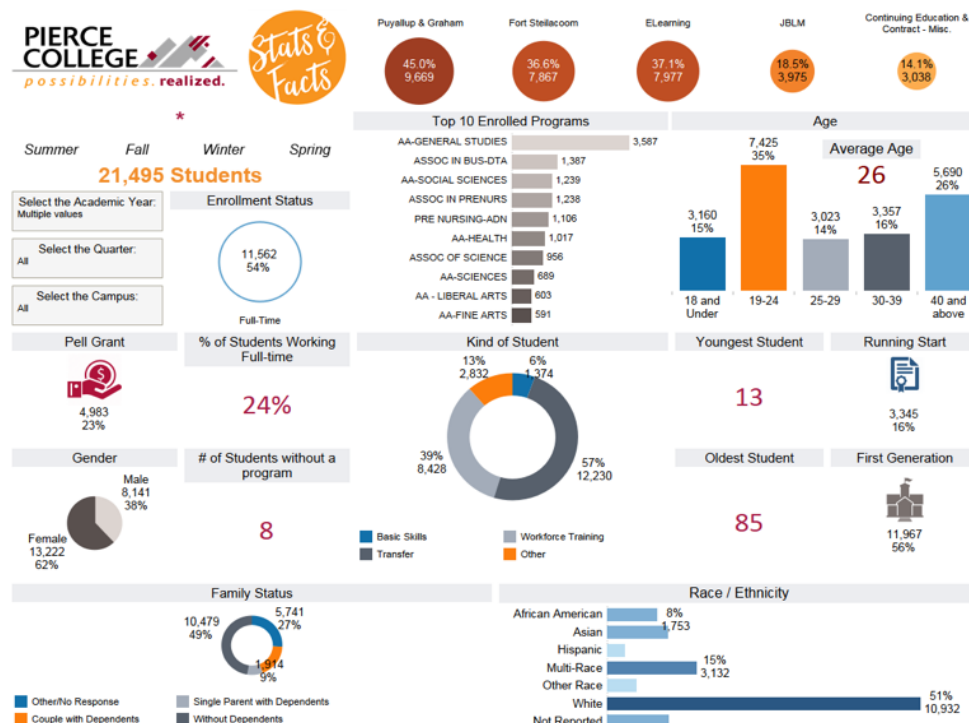


Image 4: Pierce College Enrollment Stats & Facts 2017-2018

² McNair, T. B., Albertine, S. L., Cooper, M. A., McDonald, N. L., & Major, T. (2016). *Becoming a Student-Ready College: A new culture of leadership for student success*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pierce College serves many students with a great variety of educational and professional goals. And regardless of direction, we believe all of our students come to us, come to college, with the intent of advancing not just their education, but their ability to *pursue a long-term career* goal and to *advance their standing in society*, AKA, economic and social mobility.

THE FOUR FUNDAMENTALS: MISSION, DATA, EQUITY, COLLABORATION

When I am asked to reflect on why Pierce College has been successful in advancing student success, it invariably comes down to four fundamentals that I think capture how we function; Pierce College is: ***Mission-driven, Data-informed, Equity-focused, and Highly Collaborative.***

Mission

Pierce College Mission: Pierce College creates quality educational opportunities for a diverse community of learners to thrive in an evolving world.

To share a quick story that echos the centrality of mission at Pierce, when I came to interview for my current position about six years ago, I felt a bit unprepared as I entered one of my final conversations of the day, which was with the chancellor. “I really tried to be prepared for this by having fully digested the strategic plan,” I said, “However, I looked everywhere I could imagine and couldn’t find it.” She responded, “That’s because the mission *is the strategic plan.*”

She conveyed that the mission and the core themes that the institution collaboratively identified were the purest sense of the strategic plan. That indeed, everything we do as an institution is focused on achieving mission; and each department looks to the mission and the core themes to see how and where they contribute. The metrics we have built around those core themes guide our planning, which ultimately lead to the actions that serve those themes move us toward mission fulfillment.

As an example, divisions and departments at Pierce do not formulate their own mission statements, their own values/themes. Each unit builds their work around the institutional mission and core themes, which builds focus and ultimately drives collaboration. With fewer (or *no*) competing missions, the institution *reduces the likelihood of competing interests*, minimizes departments quarreling about resources, and hastens the *work of breaking down silos* into which we separate ourselves and our work. This is fundamental because students generally do not see those artificial barriers that we have created, they are not interested in moving from silo to silo; *they want a seamless experience at an institution that cares about their success.*

I’d also posit that this is fundamental to our equity work, that by fragmenting missions and, by design, our areas of work, we create mazes that students (particularly first-generation students) must navigate with little guidance or translation. One of our faculty members recently commented that, “The rigor should be in the classroom, in the

learning, not in navigating our institutional structures.” We create barriers that have disproportionate impacts on students who come to us without the social/educational capital that comes with the privilege of having had a family member who attended college before them. Many are looking for confirmation that “they don’t belong,” and we readily hand it to them as institutional barriers, coded language, and our own competing interests rather than uniting around a single vision, which should be equitable experiences to advance student success.

Data

Around 2012, Pierce College decided it needed to move to fully engage with our data so that we could truly understand where (and who) we were as an institution, to guide where we wanted to be, and to be extremely *intentional* about measuring our progress as we responded to those data. One of the first numbers we looked at was our graduation rate. After doing the initial work to gather and confirm data on graduation, retention, etc., one of our deans who was leading this work had the unfortunate task of presenting those data to the college. At the time, our three-year graduation rate was 18.7%. And perhaps unsurprisingly, for an institution that thought it was doing good work, we entered a sort of “grieving period” during which we progressed through the Five Stages of (Data) Grief.

1. **Denial:** *“Those data aren’t real. That’s not my experience.”*
2. **Anger:** *Essentially, shouting the denial.*
3. **Bargaining:** *Here this looks more like “shifting blame,” primarily to students. “They just can’t be successful here. It is the students’ responsibility to succeed in my class!”*
4. **Depression:** *Here, I think this was (and continues to be) displayed as guilt after coming to terms with the reality of the data.*
5. **Acceptance:** *Okay, so how do we change this.*

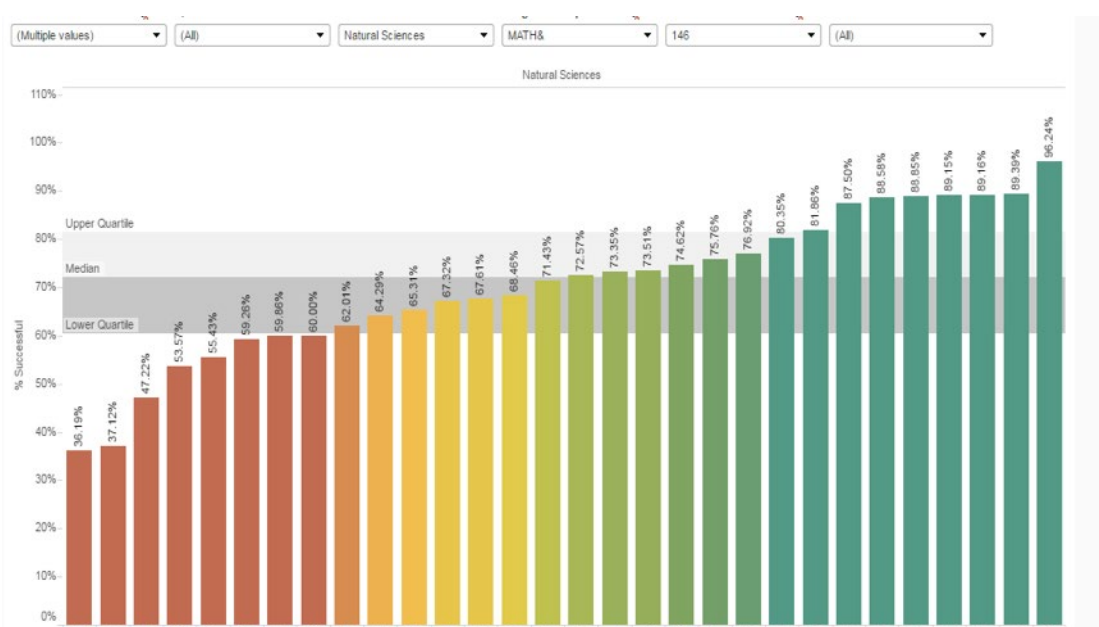
And then we shifted to a sixth step that went beyond Acceptance and moved toward **Action**.

Once we had digested the data, we formulated a variety of interventions where the data pointed us: our mathematics pipeline, our pre-college and college-level English courses, our entry and advising structures (what we called Start-to-Finish), campus engagement, and our transitional programs (how we moved students who came to complete a high school diploma into college degree or certificate programs to maximize their momentum for learning and career preparation).

And as we implemented action around these topics, we watched the data, we tracked impact ...*and we saw change*. But through this process, we also recognized that we couldn’t treat data like the Crown Jewels, under lock and key except when it was time to parade them around a bit. Thus, at Pierce we came to the realization that we had to make the data more accessible.

Initially, *this came from our faculty*. As we were getting more and more capable in exploring and presenting the data, it started to create a lot of curiosity. About this time, the math department had heard a rumor – where all good research starts – that “It wasn’t the course or the student that mattered for being successful; what really mattered was ‘who you got.’” The math faculty wanted to explore the data to see if there were patterns around student success in mathematics courses. They asked, “Can we please see, not just course success data, but section-level data, faculty-level data?” Essentially, they wanted to question the average, which is a realm we explore a lot when we present data: averages are easy to find and digest and they help us make sense of, or at least summarize, variation; however, they also hide the precise details we need to see in order to make *real, meaningful* change.

As a department, the math faculty had a history of collaboration and, an element I believe is essential here, **trust**, built through a shared interest of care for students and their success. The graph below is an example of one of the first things that was shared.



Graph 1: Section-Level Data Reveals Vast Student Success Variability Across A Single Course

This graph shows all of the Statistics courses by faculty member (who taught the course multiple times) over a five-year period, organized by percent of successful student completion. One of the first things to stand out is the range from about 36% completion to about 96% completion. This might have multiple impacts on you as a reader ...and certainly on faculty members!

The faculty conversations about this variability focused on understanding rather than blaming. “Why do we have this broad of a range? Generally, we all have the same students, so what are we doing that is resulting in this broad range of success. We have common outcomes, but are we interpreting them the same? Are we measuring mastery of those outcomes the same?”

That is transformative. That is a shift from, “Students can’t succeed in my class,” to “What can I do to help more students be successful” and “What are my colleagues doing that is different than what I am doing ...what can I learn?”

I mentioned *trust* earlier and that has been an essential element to our data transparency. We shared the data under a premise that we weren’t doing so to criticize or punish, but instead to explore. Our initial use of data was to create a “culture of evidence” (that this is more than a gut-feeling); and we ultimately wanted to create a ***culture of discovery***, one in which faculty and staff could ask questions, be innovative, and take risks based on what they found, and then continue to assess the impact of those risks (and reward that risk-taking) so that we were constantly improving.

In addition, to help manage the unavoidable desire to question the low and high completion rates, we built a Subsequent Course Completion dashboard, which showed how well a student did in the next course in a sequence. It was no surprise that all students who passed the 36% success rate course were successful in the next course ...they made it through “the gate.” But other courses with much higher pass rates also had high success in subsequent courses. This furthered conversations about outcomes, course content, presentation of material, support structures offered, and so on, which led to meaningful change for both individuals and the department.

After a few other faculty and departments started asking for and gaining access to data, we ultimately asked ourselves the question, “Should we just ‘release the data?’”

Again, *this was transformative!* Faculty were asking to see data. And not for us to provide the data to them, but for them to have access to data, so they could see them, interact with them, and ultimately respond to them.

We thought about it (but not for very long) and decided the time was right to democratize access to the data.

I would not recommend that, upon reading this, you decide that tomorrow you will break open the data warehouse and invite everyone inside! Democratizing data needs care, culture-building, and tools, what I call the Three Ts: Trust, Technology, and Training. ***Trust*** is a reciprocal process, requires relationship-building, and needs to be in place between and among multiple populations (e.g. within faculty and between faculty and administrators, Institutional Research buy-in, etc.) and this will take time.

We (administrators) hold data close to us, which creates distrust about the data and about how it is used. Consider this finding by the Community College Research Center on student success data, ***“Our findings suggest that the most frequent and intensive users of student progression and outcomes data and data disaggregated by student characteristics were not those closest to students.”***³

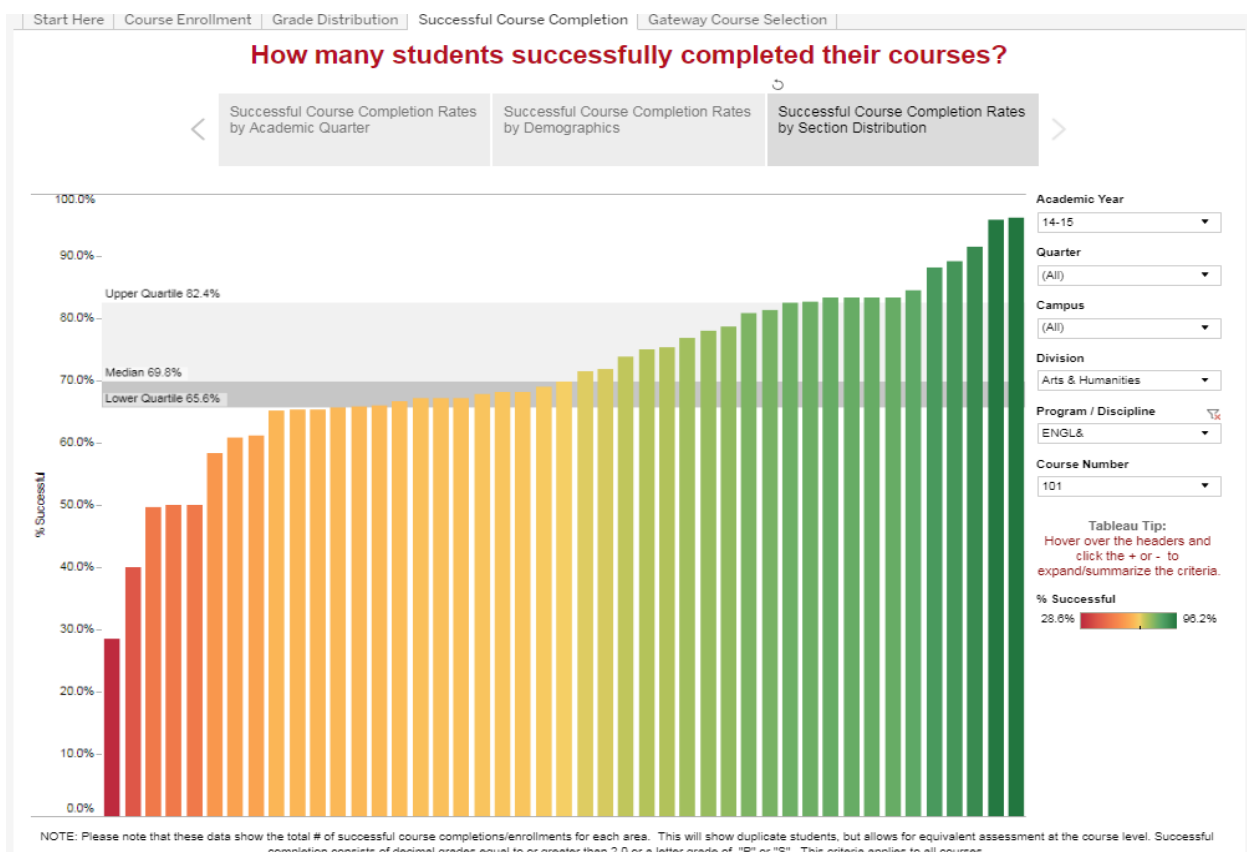
³ Kerrigan, Monica Reid & Davis Jenkins (2012). *A Growing Culture of Evidence? Findings From a Survey on Data Use at Achieving the Dream Colleges in Washington State*. CCRC, Columbia University.

That is, we have and use data in very top-down ways, which can create fear and distrust of those data. One way to reduce fear about data is to put them in the hands of faculty and other staff, advisors for example, who engage with students on a daily basis and who can exponentially advance our understanding of (and ability to respond to) our findings; that is, ***lead us to meaningful action***.

With regard to ***Technology***, a central element was having a software product capable of creating easy-to-use/intuitive data dashboards (and an IR or IT superstar to build them effectively). This helped those who were less savvy in interpreting traditional quantitative data – in particular (we also used lots of qualitative data) – with visual graphs and accompanying charts.

The third “T” is for ***Training***, which was essential both for understanding how to use the tools and to emphasize the trust element by building an understanding around the ethics of access and utilization of data.

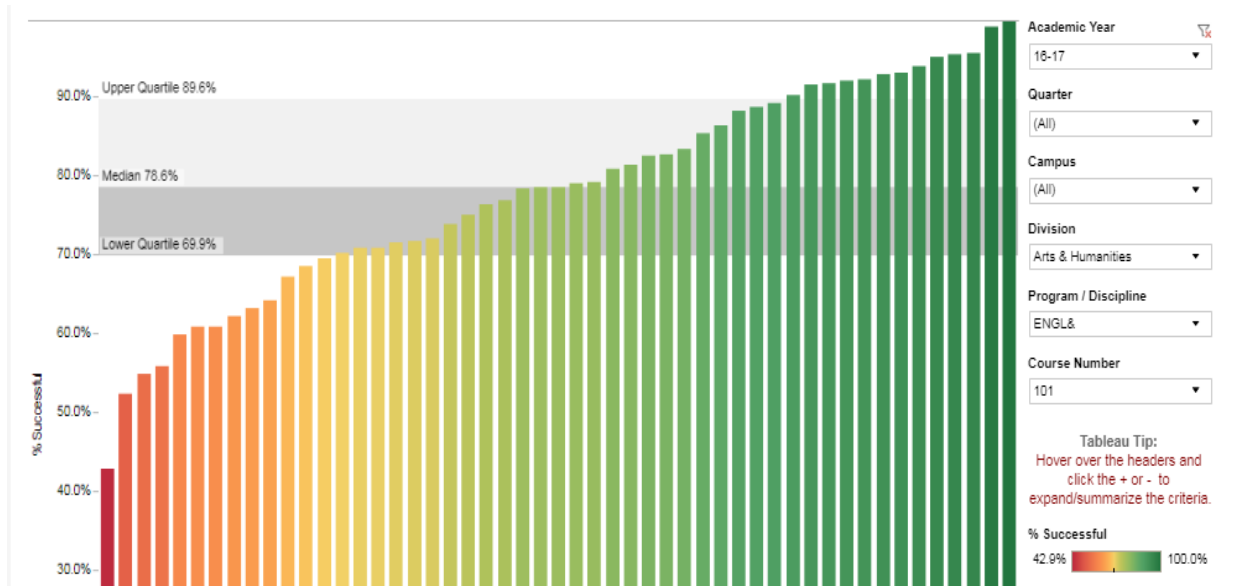
Here is what that can look like in practice. As the English department got to know their data, they discovered the same thing as the math faculty.



Graph 2: Section-Level Data In English 101 Reveals Similar Student Success Variability

They also discovered equity gaps, particularly with regard to gender. The department started the same conversations, asking similar questions about student success, curricula, pedagogy, outcomes, etc. ...and they began to implement change.

Two years later, the same evaluation metrics reveal substantial improvement. Overall, the mean success rate increased by nearly ten percentage points (12.6%) and the lowest success rate increased by nearly 45%.



Graph 3: Section-Level Data In English 101 Two Years Later Reveals Increased Success And Reduced Variability

While it is clear that there is much work still to be done, that realization comes as much from within the faculty as it does from “outside.” Above, I also mentioned equity gaps, places where we have sustained differences in student success by student demographics. Equity is the third fundamental I will discuss here as this has been the focus of Pierce’s student success work for the last couple of years.

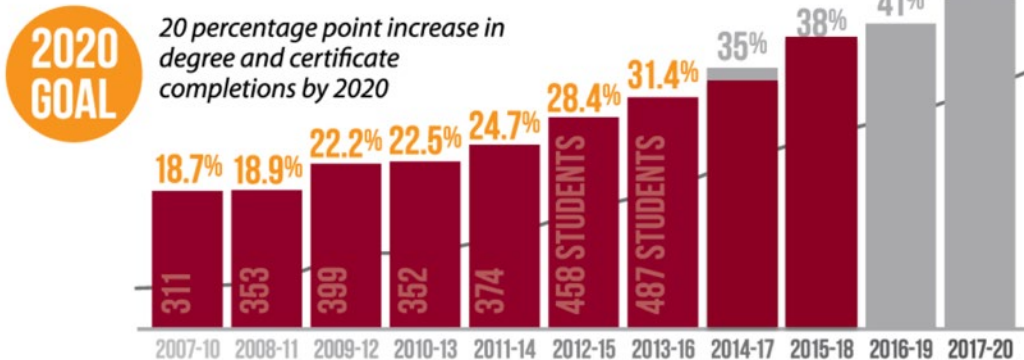
Equity

I talked briefly above about the importance of equity, about the reality that our institutions have not been structured to support all students who come to higher education. We have, initially and over time, built institutions that perpetuate systematized oppression in the form of barriers to the success of many of the students who most need the economic and social mobility that comes with higher education. Many of these barriers hide in our policies, practices, and curriculum, but our engagement with data has become a revealing wake-up call confirming that we need meaningful change in order to fully support our diverse community of learners.

In our initial efforts to address poor graduation rates, we have been able to increase our completions from 18.7% to over 38%, an increase of more than 104%!

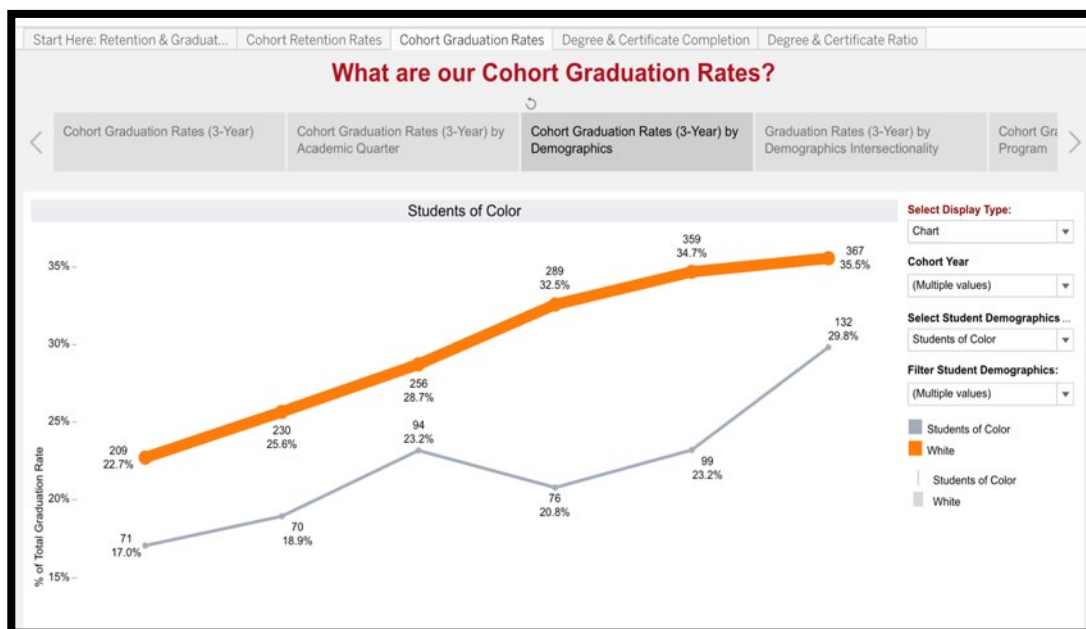
DEGREE AND CERTIFICATE COMPLETIONS

(3-YEAR RATE)



Graph 4: Pierce College Degree & Certificate Goals and Completions

However, by disaggregating our data by student demographics we have been able to identify where we must be intentional in our action and how to measure the impacts of those actions. While our success in increasing completion rates has been motivating, we remain unsatisfied and, perhaps more pressing, we have found that despite the increases for everyone, there are lingering gaps that hide within that rate (another deceptive average).



Graph 5: Equity Gaps In Graduation Rates: White Students And Students Of Color

For instance, when we disaggregate that average by White students and Students of Color, it becomes clear that we have not been successful in closing the gap between these two groups. Indeed, in many of the ways that we are able to disaggregate the

data we see equity gaps persisting. Some of that can be attributed to redesigns that have not been in place long enough to emerge in the data. But we know there are deeper institutional barriers and biases that we have only begun to identify that need to be removed as well. These exist in our curriculum/textbooks, policies that penalize those most at risk, lack of a diverse faculty body, etc.

The practice of democratizing the data discussed above provides multiple insights regarding equity. First, *without longitudinal data, it is very difficult to see the impact of our practices* (whether collectively as an institution or individually in the classroom). For instance, while I may look at data from class to class, it is often quite difficult to discern that my pedagogy and my syllabus may be having any specific adverse impacts. But if I am able to look at disaggregated data over time, I can then see where those consistent gaps persist, such as race/ethnicity, single parent, veterans, gender, etc., and then I can formulate intentional actions in response.

It is clear to us that Pierce has a long way to go in this work. But we are learning and taking intentional actions to address equity, including:

1. Altering hiring practices and vastly increasing the diversity of our faculty/staff;
2. Building an expectation of culturally responsive practices into all job descriptions;
3. Weaving equity discourse into our conversations and our decision-making;
4. Engaging in individual and group work on **privilege** and **racial justice**;
5. Building equity into faculty research about teaching skills and pedagogy, and into all of our employee learning/development for *all* employees at *all* levels;
6. *Building and implementing **guided career pathways*** that aim to demystify the experience of pursuing a degree, decode the language of higher education, and are explicit about the value and relevance of general education courses to the program/career in order to reduce fear, remove decision paralysis, and minimize the likelihood of excess credits;
7. Examining our technology/data science to identify places where institutionalized racism and oppression linger, for if we build our conscious/unconscious bias into the algorithms that run our technology, *we simply become more efficient in that oppression*, all while thinking we are doing good and being more responsive. This is not to say that we should avoid technology, but we must be mindful of embedded biases and how we react to the products of our technology tools.

Ultimately, we have *set equity as an institutional priority*. And, to bring it full-circle, we have a responsibility to equity as it is built into the Pierce College Mission, to create quality educational opportunities **for a diverse community of learners** to thrive in an evolving world. We must build opportunities that consider and respond to the unique identity needs and lived experiences of our diverse communities if we are to be successful as providers of higher education.

It has been said that you measure what is important. I would extend that to say that we set goals around, measure, and *hold ourselves accountable* to what is important.

In 2015, we, including our Board of Trustees, set a goal to eliminate equity gaps by 2020. In 2018, our Trustees added specific areas of focus to those goals and highlighted that we are intentional in advancing racial and social justice. Our Board and the institution recognized that we had to be explicit about race, otherwise we tend to avoid it because it is the most difficult to talk about, but it is where intentionality and meaningful action are most needed; if you are not talking about race, you will never move beyond a certain point and your ability to improve will always be limited.

Highly Collaborative

Finally, I want to include a few words about collaboration. Pierce is not a place where folks wander about doing their own thing. This echoes the concept of “one mission” discussed above. We are, perhaps to a fault, a highly collaborative, matrix organization. We have hierarchies, but also recognize that those structures can create barriers and can limit our ability to be creative, innovative, and responsive. At Pierce, you are just as likely to be on a committee with a front-line advisor as you are with a dean, with a custodial services manager as you are with the chancellor. We believe that every position at the institution is necessary to achieve the Pierce College mission, and thus, we create opportunities for each to participate in the shared governance of the institution and to see, through engagement, how they contribute to advancing the mission and to supporting student success.

Further, that collaboration does not stop at the door. We are committed to working with our community and technical college colleagues, our K-12 partners, and the institutions to which many of our students will transition for the next portion of their career pathway. And so, I see you, dear reader, as a partner to support student success and invite you to connect with Pierce College to find innovative ways to support this mission.

CLOSING

Mission, how we engage data, and more than anything, how we shift higher education to serve, rather than confound, equity is central to the work of the Commission and *all* of our institutions. Else, we live in the past and deny our future and what is necessary for true student success.

I must also note that, as a speaker at the NWCCU Annual Meeting, it was not lost on me that I was the *fourth* “old white guy” to take this stage that day. *We have diversity in the Commission* and we must provide and champion those voices and perspectives in this work!

So, as you contemplate your role in accreditation, standards, assessment, and outcomes, I implore you to consider:

1. How will your institution work together to fully meet the needs of your student population?
 2. How might you further access to data to drive racial and social justice outcomes?
- And,

3. How will you systematically identify and remove barriers that impact equity and student success?