

Student Success as a Moral Imperative

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Student Success. This is the mantra these days at the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, as it is in Washington, DC. On Capitol Hill, where members of relevant Senate and House committees are discussing reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. At the United States Department of Education, which has convened conversations and is making decisions on the NegRegs (*aka* Negotiated Rulemaking for Higher Education 2018-19) and the recently updated Accreditor's Bible, *34 CFR Part 602*. And, in the windowless meeting rooms of myriad thinktanks on the Right and Left of the political spectrum discussing the (shortcomings of?) higher education.

With the onset of fall term, many of the NWCCU family of institutions are hosting convocations and workshops for faculty focused on student success.

Likewise, the 2020 Eligibility Requirements and Standards for Accreditation, which was overwhelmingly approved by the NWCCU member institutions, focus on promoting student success and closing equity gaps.

Student success is defined by student learning and achievement that occurs as a result of the educational programs, experiences, and support offered by the college such that students accomplish their current and future academic, personal, and professional goals.

We define closing equity gaps as the effort to advance fairness and opportunity by providing support to promote student achievement and close barriers to academic excellence and success.

At a fundamental level, however, I view student success to be a moral imperative, i.e., as a compulsion to act.

Immanuel Kant considered moral imperative to be a dictate of pure reason, while others considered it to originate in conscience.

Some suggest that not following a moral imperative is akin to making a promise that you do not intend to keep.

In the world of higher education, colleges “promise” students that, if they paid their tuition and fees, attended classes, and did everything required and expected of them, they’d achieve their educational goals, be it a degree or certificate or credential. Yet, across America and in our own region, we have institutions struggling to deliver on the promise, which has, in part, contributed to a negative view of higher education.

How can we collectively do better to deliver on the promise made to students?

Every individual on campus—students, staff, administrators, and other relevant members of the campus community—has a critical role in delivering on this moral imperative of student success, not just faculty, who own the curricula, teach, and have the primary role in ensuring student success.

As an accreditor, we have a role as well, albeit one of holding institutions accountable. In developing the new standards, as I noted earlier, NWCCU is focused on promoting student success and closing equity

gaps. Our approach will be to support evidence- and data-informed, continuous improvement by creating a risk-based approach of promoting educational outcomes at institutions that are struggling and promoting risk-taking and innovations at others.

The new standards also focus on inculcating core competencies, *aka* the non-cognitive, people skills, such as communication, critical thinking, problem solving, digital and information literacy, collaboration, ethics and professionalism, global competency, and others. Extant literature and numerous surveys have shown that the non-cognitive core competencies are enduring, whereas the cognitive technical skills need to be renewed fairly frequently because the “shelf life” of the latter, particularly in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) disciplines apparently is only about four to five years.

Some institutions view students with a monolithic lens, i.e., a one-size-fits-all approach. However, we know based on years of data and analysis that each student is unique, particularly those coming from poor and/or underrepresented backgrounds.

Indeed, exceptionally successful institutions create highly personalized education, catering to each student individually by paying attention to tailored advising, classroom and experiential learning, financial and other aid, support services, housing, food, daycare for students who are parents, and offer other critical support.

Over the last couple of years, much ink and bits and bytes have been expended to discuss various recipes for promoting student success.

In writing this article I did a Google search for the term “student success scholarly articles”. I got almost 63 million hits! In just the first ten pages, I came across books, journal articles, dedicated journal titles, centers, institutes, workshops, etc., etc., etc. focused on student success, with many offering various recipes for success.

It’s an interesting read, some of which I have shared during the last year with our community of institutions. I have also seen a number of our own NWCCU institutions with demonstrable success, some of whom we hope to spotlight as we announce the inaugural winners of the *Beacon Award* at the Awards Luncheon on November 21 during the 2019 Annual Conference.

A few years ago, I came up with my own recipe for student success, for which I created a mnemonic: **ABCDEF**, where:

A is for (Intrusive) Advising and Attendance. It’s been demonstrably shown that institutions that focus on having faculty and staff provide tailored, hands-on advising see significantly better outcomes than those that either provide no advising at all or end up assigning, I kid you not, 1,000 students to each advisor. Just the mere act of ensuring that students are being informed works wonders; for example, recent studies show digital nudging prods students into starting and staying in college. Also, ensuring students are actually attending classes works. In the old days, we took rolls for attendance; in my informal sampling I have discovered most faculty don’t see value in taking rolls, but we know from studies that helps keep track of students. Students who are lax in attendance more than likely end up dropping out. Peer coaches—either upper class students or recently graduated alumni—paired with advisors offer another powerful approach to ensure student success.

B is for Behavior. Faculty need training to be on the lookout for students exhibiting strange and untoward/unwarranted behaviors, including absences. This may be the result of multiple different factors, including need to work, lack of sleep for various reasons, hunger, poverty, homelessness, substance (ab)use, issues at home, and other myriad factors. If such behaviors are exhibited, a simple check-in with the student and follow up by faculty with referral to relevant campus or community resources goes a long way in signaling that someone actually cares, ensuring the student has a safety net.

C is for Courses. Often students aren't able to achieve their aspirational goals and/or complete their degrees or programs or credentialing, because the relevant courses were not being offered in a proper sequence or because of budget cuts they were completely eliminated. Proper advising would mitigate the same and the institution could either make arrangements for the course to be taught by someone else or be offered as an independent study or be availed online. Some institutions, such as University of Buffalo, offer a "four-year degree or tuition back guarantee", i.e., all students are guaranteed to graduate in four years, if they did everything that was expected of them and the institutions work really hard to ensure the students have all courses sequenced and have their others needs met, as well. Finally, some of you likely have heard of the Big Ten Academic Alliance created as a collaborative platform for sharing courses and programs via reciprocity agreements or WICHE's Interstate Passport program in which some of our institutions are members, which are potential approaches to ensuring students avail courses they need to graduate on time.

D is for (Disaggregated) Data. A number of institutions such as Georgia State University and others have capitalized on evidence- and data-informed, disaggregated by gender, race, ethnicity, Pell eligibility, first generation, and other institutionally identified groups, approaches and predictive analytics to significantly enhance graduation rates and close equity gaps. Combined with intrusive advising, evidence, data, and analytics are powerful tools. Additionally, experiences at some institutions have shown that empowering faculty, staff, students, and other relevant individuals to "own and be trained to use data", thus, democratizing data, are resulting in significant gains in promoting student success and closing equity gaps.

E is for Experiential Education. The extant literature shows that every student, regardless of their background, major, or educational aspirations, benefits from experiential learning, which could include hands on learning, practical education, internships, externships, service learning, and a host of other approaches. These latter need to be done with clearly defined—for the student and for the institution—educational goals and outcomes of the experience. Experiential education also creates a sense of purpose and belonging and makes the individual more resilient when confronted with potential setbacks of life. Experiential education combined with the core competencies noted above are a powerful recipe to promote student success, particularly for individuals who come from poor and underrepresented backgrounds.

F is for Finances. The lack of financial support—and not just in the form of scholarships—combined with escalating tuition and fees are one of the oft-cited reasons why students are unable to complete on time or even drop out. Creating on-campus employment opportunities such as, for example, on funded research projects, whenever possible for students to avail, can serve two purposes: source of revenue and an opportunity for experiential learning noted above, which would require advisors to become intimately involved in the process. Many student surveys and effective practices have shown that providing support for transportation, day- and child-care, food, shelter, books, digital educational

resources, and emergency grants, to name a few, also create pathways to ensure students stay and complete.

I have had the privilege of traveling to and engaging with faculty and staff on many campuses, and I offer my kudos to them for their creativity, imagination, and vibrancy for developing many different approaches to promote student success and to close equity gaps. And, I have seen some that are struggling.

At NWCCU, we are stepping up efforts in the form of Workshops, Academies, and Training Sessions to bring the best ideas and approaches from across America to our region to support efforts to promote student success at our institutions. Our intent is to continue to grow these efforts and to create evangelizers to work with college faculty, leaders, and staff to adapt and adopt best practices.

Finally, the theme of NWCCU's 2019 Annual Conference is *Value Proposition: Student Success*. The conference will spotlight workshops and training sessions, along with plenary sessions and panel discussions on approaches, to promote student success. I have asked all of our speakers to "share their secret sauce" with the attendees.

We hope all of these efforts will help us focus single mindedly on the moral imperative of promoting student success.