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How to Help Students Achieve

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As many as four-fifths of high-school graduates will need some form of postsecondary education if they are to become self-sufficient and the nation is to remain economically competitive. At the same time, policy makers, business leaders, and national study groups say the quality of student learning is subpar and want measures of institutional and student performance made public. Yet surprisingly little attention focuses on what higher-education institutions can do to help students survive and thrive in college.

The situation is complicated as tens of thousands of undergraduates today must deal with one or more circumstances that seriously challenge their ability to succeed. Socioeconomic background, financial means, college readiness, and support from home substantially influence whether a person will earn a credential or degree.

Javier, for instance, is the first in his family to go to college. His residence hall houses 600 other first-year students, but no one on his floor is in any of his classes, so he is on his own and adrift when it comes to studying.

Nicole left college after her first year to get married. Now divorced with a child, she works 30 hours a week and is taking two courses this term. Her life at college is limited mostly to finding a place to park near the campus and going to class.

Unsure of her major, Sarah struggles with her writing, which was a problem in high school as well. After three semesters of college, only her composition course has required a few short papers, while all her tests have been multiple choice or true-false. She is worried because two of her finals this term will be essay exams.

Yet whatever their situations, once students like Javier, Nicole, and Sarah start college, whether they persevere and how much they get out of their studies are largely the result of their individual effort and involvement. That is one of the key findings of the annual National Survey of Student Engagement that I direct at the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University at Bloomington. The results of the survey, which records actual student experiences at more than 600 institutions across the country, show that the time and energy that students devote to their studies and other educationally purposeful activities positively influence their grades and persistence. In other words, a key to academic success for students is their engagement.

Ernest T. Pascarella of the University of Iowa and Patrick T. Terenzini of Pennsylvania State University came to a similar conclusion in their book, *How College Affects Students*
(2nd edition, Jossey-Bass, 2005), after summarizing thousands of studies. As Lee S. Shulman, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, says, because student engagement is a precursor for knowledge and understanding, it is both a proxy for learning as well as a desired outcome in itself. By being engaged — something not represented in outcomes measures — students develop habits that promise to stand them in good stead for a lifetime of continuous learning.

The results of our survey and my own extensive research into the topic suggests six concrete steps that institutions can take to engage students like Javier, Sarah, and Nicole:

Teach first-year students as early as possible how to use college resources effectively. Most institutions offer a blend of summer orientation or advising sessions and a fall welcome week. While helpful, those practices cannot teach most students all they need to know and do to make the most of college. Simply living on the campus increases the odds that a student like Javier will return for a second year of study, but it does not guarantee that he will take advantage of academic-support services, participate in co-curricular activities, or interact with faculty members or friends on a meaningful level. That is especially the case for first-generation students who don't know what to expect from college life.

Institutions that are serious about helping more-vulnerable students succeed employ other mechanisms like first-year seminars, supplemental instruction, and placement tests that ensure students are in courses for which they are prepared. They also provide "intrusive advising" — like George Mason University's academic-advising office, which contacts students with low grades who have not declared a major, and Ursinus College, where a residence-life staff member or faculty adviser meets with students who seem to be struggling academically or socially. Prompt feedback about academic performance is also essential, since midterm-exam time is often too late for a student to salvage a semester.

In addition, one increasingly common activity that has proved to be effective for students like Javier is participating in a learning community. For example, freshman students in residence-based learning communities at the University of Missouri at Columbia live in the same building and take the same three core courses and an additional class focused on the skills needed to succeed in college, giving them common ground both in and out the classroom.

According to our survey results, students who live in learning communities tend to interact more with their professors and diverse peers, study more, and excel at synthesizing material and analyzing problems. They also reported gaining more from their college experience. Moreover, the "engagement advantage" for students in learning communities lasts through senior year, suggesting that the experience — which most students have in their first college year — positively affects what they do later in college. Vincent Tinto, distinguished university professor and chair of the higher-education program at Syracuse University, and researchers at the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education at Evergreen State College have found that nonresidential learning communities generally have similar salutary effects for community-college students.

Make the classroom the locus of community.
Decades ago, when most undergraduates lived near their classmates and teachers, proximity and serendipity established the social order and instilled shared values and understandings. Today the majority of students are like Nicole; they commute to classes and work many hours a week. As a result, they spend a limited amount of time on the campus and have less contact with faculty members, as the results of our 2006 survey show.

For them, the classroom is the only venue where they regularly have face-to-face contact with faculty or staff members and other students, learn how the institution works, and absorb the campus culture. That makes professors' jobs in the classroom much more demanding and complicated. They must cultivate an atmosphere in which a group of strangers will listen attentively to others with respect, and challenge and support one another to previously unimagined levels of academic performance.

Professors who are skilled at managing class discussion make use of cooperative learning activities that get students working together during and after class on meaningful tasks. Along with subject matter, they teach institutional values and academic norms; they inform students about campus events and such nontrivial matters as course-registration deadlines and when and how to apply for financial aid.

Faculty members should not have to do this alone, however. For example, at the University of Texas at El Paso, an instructional team for the required first-year seminar in critical inquiry consists of a faculty member, an undergraduate peer leader, and a librarian. They emphasize active-learning approaches that engage students who prefer concrete, hands-on learning activities — like group projects that sometimes take students off the campus and into their home communities.

Develop networks and early-warning systems to support students when they need help. Three-fifths of students in public two-year colleges and one-quarter of students in four-year institutions must complete at least one remedial course. No wonder nine out of every 10 students starting college say they intend to use an academic-assistance or learning-skills center. But by the end of the first year, only about half as many have done so, according to our surveys. To make sure that students who need help get it, some colleges create first-year-student "tag teams" composed of some combination of faculty members, peer mentors, advisers, student-affairs officials, librarians, and other staff members. Academic-support staff members monitor class-attendance patterns, drop/add information, early-semester and midterm grades, and preregistration information to identify and intervene with students who are experiencing academic difficulties.

For example, instructors in Fayetteville State University's Early Alert program contact a student's adviser if the student seems to be struggling. At Wheaton College, in Massachusetts, a first-year student's advising team is made up of a faculty member, a student preceptor, and an administrative adviser — usually a student-life staff member or a librarian. Other programs that have proved successful include supplemental instruction, using peers as mentors, theme-based campus housing, on-campus work, internships, and service learning.

Connect every student in a meaningful way with some activity or positive role model. When students are responsible for tasks that require daily decisions over an extended period, they become invested in the activity that deepens their commitment to the college and their studies. Our survey shows that members of athletics teams, choirs and bands, and fraternities and sororities tend to graduate at higher rates, in part because the momentum of the group carries them forward, buoying them during difficult times. They also derive personal satisfaction by being a part of something larger than themselves. Working on the campus, writing for the student newspaper, or conducting research with a faculty member have numerous benefits, not the least of which is having another source of support and encouragement for persevering when times get tough.

Connecting students to somebody or something worthwhile is everyone's business. At the University of Kansas and other institutions, faculty members occasionally take a moment of class time to encourage students to get involved with a campus-based organization or to volunteer in the local community. Advisers, counselors, student-life staff members, and faculty members can make a big difference in the life of more than a few students by encouraging them to get involved with one or more of these kinds of activities or people.

If a program or practice works, make it widely available.
Most institutions have small, boutiquelike programs for honors students or student-government leaders, but they typically include only a small fraction of undergraduates. Granted, no single teaching approach, classroom structure, or out-of-class experience will be effective with every student. But we should not ignore evidence, for example, that students who encounter diverse perspectives in their classes benefit more in desirable ways than their counterparts with less exposure, or that students who apply what they are learning in classes to real-world problems — as often happens during well-designed internships, study abroad, or service learning — deepen their learning and sharpen their critical-thinking skills.

In fact, if a program is successful, some students should be required to take it. Left to their own devices, students (and faculty members) do not always choose wisely, as Carol A. Twigg, president and chief executive officer of the National Center for Aca-demic Transformation, discovered in her successful experiments with technology-enriched course redesigns. She concluded that first-year students "don't do optional" — even when it is in their interest to do so.

Remove obstacles to student engagement and success.
One roadblock found on scores of campuses is "the runaround." Variations abound, but the basic story line is that no matter where students turn, they cannot get the information or help they need, whether from residence-life administrators, the registrar, or others. That stands in stark contrast to colleges with cultures marked by a sense of positive restlessness, where people are constantly asking how they can improve what they do, and administrators regularly evaluate campus priorities, policies, and programs. Such examinations can be formal, such as program reviews or accreditation self-studies. Informal reviews stimulated by faculty curiosity or visionary leaders also can lead to positive change.

The University of Michigan, for instance, conducted six major studies of the quality of the undergraduate experience between the mid-1980s and 2000, resulting in new online counseling and information services, a systemic revision in science and mathematics instruction, and the placement of faculty fellows in residence halls, among other new programs.

Several years ago, the math faculty on my own campus retooled a math course in which more than a third of the students in any given term either received a D or F, or withdrew from the class. They created a reduced-pace, two-semester course using the same material and exams. The number of students who now complete the course with a C or better has jumped by about 30 percent.

Even when institutions establish programs like those that I've outlined and faculty members use effective teaching and learning approaches, such efforts will not in every case make up for students' inadequate academic preparation in elementary and secondary school. Still, we can do better by the likes of Javier, Sarah, and Nicole by engaging them in purposeful activities that enhance their learning and personal development. The real question is whether we have the will to increase the odds that more students will get ready, get in, and get through.

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