

# STUDENT SUCCESS *in* COLLEGE

Promoting Student Success

## The Importance of Shared Leadership and Collaboration

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Occasional Paper #4

### Six Conditions that Matter to Student Success

- I. "Living" Mission and "Lived" Educational Philosophy
- II. Unshakeable Focus on Student Learning
- III. Environments Adapted for Educational Enrichment
- IV. Clear Pathways to Student Success
- V. Improvement-Oriented Ethos
- VI. Shared Responsibility for Educational Quality and Student Success



**C**ollaborative, shared leadership among administrators, students, faculty, and staff is a key component to creating campus environments that foster student success. Collaborative work groups can be powerful vehicles for launching and institutionalizing student-friendly policies and practices and for developing complementary programs such as first-year initiatives, fresh approaches to general education curricular offerings, service-learning, and student leadership development programs among others. Such initiatives almost always result in richer learning opportunities for students when done collaboratively than when an individual unit develops them.

But collaborative approaches to leadership and program development do not come naturally within higher education institutions that reward individualistic endeavors over collaboration. The guiding principles offered here for promoting shared leadership and collaboration are based on an in-depth examination of 20 diverse four-year colleges and universities that have higher-than-predicted graduation rates and, as demonstrated through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), effective policies and practices for engaging their students.



National Survey  
of Student Engagement

### ***1. Develop a shared understanding of institutional mission and philosophy***

One distinctive characteristic of educationally effective institutions is that various groups share the responsibility for student learning and student success. But how is this sense of shared responsibility achieved? A key condition seems to be that faculty, staff, and students are committed to their school's mission, vision, and philosophy. For example, Fayetteville State University faculty, staff and administrators affirm students for their talents, eschewing a deficit model of collegiate learning. They also intentionally teach students what they need to know to succeed, academically and socially. This commitment to student success is now sewn into the institution's cultural fabric. Another approach to cultivating a shared vision and philosophy is to intentionally teach new faculty and staff members about the institution's mission and values, using public forums and printed materials to reinforce and further develop the message. Institutions can counter the tendencies toward specialization and fragmentation by working toward establishing a shared understanding of mission and philosophy. One example is the First-Year Experience and Choice Matters initiatives at Miami University which reflect the shared vision of the senior academic and student affairs administrators of what the undergraduate experience at Miami can and should be.

### ***2. Use celebrations to engage the campus community in conversations about student success***

Inclusive leadership approaches are in part a product of shared vision and goals, but also a strong sense of community. One way to build a strong sense of community is through major events that celebrate the accomplishments of individuals and groups within the institution. Creating a sense of community on campus and among students and faculty is especially challenging for commuter institutions such as George Mason University (GMU). However, GMU has developed an array of structures and opportunities to connect community members with one another and the university. Programs such as International Week and Celebrations of Scholarship along with monthly events sponsored by the Center for Teaching Excellence affirm shared values and experiences and recognize community achievements. Another tactic is to hold campus-wide conversations about what matters to student success. Some institutions such as Alverno College and The Evergreen State College schedule program or unit meetings to discuss results from the National Survey of Student Engagement

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(NSSE), with institutional researchers making summaries of the data available beforehand to prompt thinking about what the campus could do to enhance student learning consistent with their mission. Faculty developers are also involved, helping faculty understand how to interpret data for teaching improvement, and along with librarians, augment the survey information with qualitative data.

### ***3. Advocate for shared governance***

Encouraging active participation by faculty, students and staff in institutional governance at all levels reinforces the value and necessity of working together to create student success. Evergreen State makes it possible for all members of the campus community to participate in the governance of their college by not holding classes at designated times on Monday and Wednesday afternoons so that projects and Disappearing Task Forces can do their business. Wheaton College invited the entire campus to participate in the deliberations about the proposed curricular reforms with the Educational Policy Committee (EPC), made up of faculty and students, shepherding the process. The University of Maine at

Farmington's (UMF) inclusive decision-making process is exemplified in the decision that led to its highly effective "Excellence through Connected and Engaged Learning (EXCEL)" program. By 1997, UMF had fallen behind in implementing instructional technologies and the idea about how to address this situation came from a campus-wide "technology fishbowl" dialogue; not an announcement by the administration. Enthusiastically endorsed by the president, faculty and

staff designed the EXCEL program and have a real stake in seeing that it flourishes.

### ***4. Ensure that students have a prominent voice in campus governance***

Students bring an essential perspective for creating a success-oriented learning environment. No wonder that high-performing schools include students in policymaking and on committees, task forces, and governance groups, often in leadership roles. For example, at the University of Kansas, the vice president of the 50-member University Council is always a student; the president is always a faculty member. The University of Maine at Farmington encourages students to serve on committees and campus decision-making, a philosophy of governance that is duly noted by students. As one student leader commented: "My vote counts just as much as the faculty's." At Wheaton, students sit on a variety of college committees: Student-Trustee Liaison Committee, the Budget Advisory Committee, search committees, task forces, and the Educational Policy



Committee, where they played an important role in the curriculum redesign.

### ***5. Alter structures to encourage cross-functional activities focused on student success***

Many groups on campuses find it difficult to work in cross-functional ways because institutional structures stand in the way and there are no rewards for groups that attempt to work together to focus on student success. George Mason University established new computing and accounting systems that allow for team teaching, interdisciplinary research, job sharing, and joint work activities. Modifying tenure and promotion requirements and personnel evaluation processes also helped. Collaboration and cross-unit work now is represented on annual review documents and taken into account when determining merit pay. At the University of the South, the dean encouraged faculty members to develop the First Year Program by providing resources for innovative collaborative curricular development. At Longwood University, the president created structural links between units that need to work closely together to support student success. The vice president of student affairs now reports directly to the provost and serves on the tenure committee to ensure that students' out-of-class experiences are represented by student affairs during meetings of the academic deans. This, in turn, has resulted in a higher degree of faculty involvement in student affairs programs. Without the rewards, resources, or restructuring, the many innovative programs they had been established would not have flourished.

### ***6. Tighten the philosophical and operational linkages between academic and student affairs***

Shared leadership and collaboration can be stymied by belief systems as well as rewards and structures. Many colleges and universities do not see students' out-of-class activities or student affairs units as contributing to their educational missions. But at strong performing institutions, student affairs professionals recognize their primary obligation is to support the institution's academic mission and view themselves as full partners in the enterprise—team-teaching with faculty members, participating in campus governance, and managing enriching educational opportunities for students such as peer tutoring and mentoring, first-year seminars, and learning communities. This philosophical commitment enables student and academic affairs to work together in such key areas as advising and career services as well as some curricular innovations. For example, the “Common Intellectual Experience” (CIE) at Ursinus grew out of discussions with faculty and administrators about how to strengthen the liberal arts. Student affairs staff

contributed to the effort by creating first-year living units and connecting co-curricular programming to CIE readings and goals. At Alverno, student services staff members describe themselves as “partners in learning,” having identified desired co-curricular outcomes that complement the college's Eight Abilities outcomes. According to one staff member, “We see ourselves as an extension of the classroom,” helping students translate their learning into different settings and reflecting on their experiences outside the classroom. At Evergreen State, faculty and administrators are almost as likely as the student affairs staff to get involved in handling student crises and assisting students with transition issues. Removing barriers to collaboration also enabled the University of Michigan to develop various living-learning programs such as the Residential College, Michigan Community Scholars Program, and the Women in Science and Engineering residential program (WISE) which are the collaborative efforts of student and academic affairs. As a result of this work, faculty and student affairs staff develop a deeper appreciation and respect for one another's contributions.

### ***7. Empower and support faculty leadership***

Some leadership takes place across units, such as the student and academic affairs, others happen between groups. Shared faculty leadership is characteristic of strong performing schools, especially with regard to curriculum revision. At Wofford and Ursinus, the focus on creating common intellectual experiences tended to neutralize the polarizing effects of disciplinary loyalty by compelling faculty to pull together to work on a project that benefited the whole college and enhanced the overall quality of the student experience. George Mason, Wheaton, and Wofford all transformed the faculty culture through reforms aimed at general education. On some campuses, the faculty senate was a key to developing shared leadership. For example, George Mason implemented its well regarded Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) initiative through the efforts of a faculty senate task force. At California State University, Monterey Bay, the faculty senate leadership was concerned about academic rigor and worked to develop a reflective essay that has become central to the work of faculty across campus.

### ***8. Create and capitalize on cross-functional, boundary-spanning activities***

Certain tasks such as assessment, technology, accreditation or planning and certain roles such as institutional researchers, directors of teaching and learning centers, and librarians are boundary-spanning work. These tasks and roles usually reach across the campus and are strong models for collaboration on campus. Educationally effective schools used these groups as role models to encourage collaboration and

cultivate shared leadership. At George Mason University, University of Michigan, and University of Kansas retention and assessment committees brought together staff, faculty, and students from various units into working groups to ensure that policies developed were sound. For example, assessment offices at Alverno, California State University, Monterey Bay, and George Mason University helped to develop networks that continued to discuss campus policies beyond assessment. At many campuses, working on technology problems made them realize that programs and policies would not be effective unless they were formed with the entire campus and its constituents in mind. A technology system that worked for the financial aid office may be in conflict with systems used by the library or research offices, lowering the success of the system for students.

### Questions to Ponder:

Although there is no blueprint for creating a student success-oriented institution, thinking about how these principles can be adapted to your institutional context and culture could make a positive difference in terms of student learning.

1. Do campus leaders have a common view of the institution's mission, vision and philosophy?
2. How is community celebrated and fostered?
3. Is collaboration and distributed leadership modeled through shared governance?
4. What mechanisms are available to involve students in campus governance?
5. Are cross-functional activities focused on student success encouraged and supported?
6. Are collaborative efforts between academic and student affairs encouraged?

Answers to these questions from different types of strong performing institutions around the country are offered in *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That*

*Matter*. The book features what 20 diverse, educationally effective college and universities do to promote student success. The Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project was supported with generous grants from Lumina Foundation for Education and the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. Altogether, the 24-member research team talked with more than 2,700 people during its 40 multiple-day site visits to the DEEP schools. Six properties and conditions shared by these colleges and universities are discussed along with a wide array of effective educational policies and practices that if adapted appropriately can help a campus create and sustain a culture that supports student success. The book can be used in faculty and staff development, strategic planning, institutional mission clarification, leadership development, and collaborative efforts between academic and student affairs. A companion volume, *Assessing Conditions for Student Success: An Inventory to Enhance Educational Effectiveness*, will be available in September 2005. It provides a template for institutions to use to identify areas of institutional functioning that can be strengthened to promote student success.

### Sources:

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### Project DEEP Colleges and Universities

Alverno College (WI)  
California State University at Monterey Bay (CA)  
The Evergreen State College (WA)  
Fayetteville State University (NC)  
George Mason University (VA)  
Gonzaga University (WA)  
Longwood University (VA)  
Macalester College (MN)  
Miami University (OH)  
Sewanee: University of the South (TN)

Sweet Briar College (VA)  
University of Kansas (KS)  
University of Maine at Farmington (ME)  
University of Michigan (MI)  
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