ARE ALL OF YOUR EDUCATORS EDUCATING?

Institutions that excel are filled with educators in the curriculum and cocurriculum who believe student learning is everyone's business. Elizabeth Whitt characterizes how excellent educators in the cocurriculum do their work.

By Elizabeth J. Whitt

INTEREST in creating conditions that enhance student learning and support students in achieving their educational goals is at an all-time high. The pool of prospective undergraduates is larger and more diverse than ever, and four-fifths of high school graduates will require some form of postsecondary education to acquire the knowledge and competencies necessary to address increasingly complex social, economic, and political issues. Although these challenges are daunting, all colleges and universities can face them effectively. The extensive body of research on college impact suggests that focusing on student engagement—that is, what students *do* during college—is the best way to enhance student success. Student engagement generally matters more than who the students are or even where they go to college in determining what they learn and whether they persist to graduation. Studies of college impact also demonstrate the holistic nature of engagement: to be effective, student engagement must be facilitated in class and out of class and in curricular and cocurricular activities. The contribution of out-of-class experiences to student engagement cannot be overstated. Although these experiences are the responsibility of all members of the campus community, including faculty and the students themselves, I focus here on the roles and responsibilities of student affairs educators because the cocurriculum is their primary responsibility. Any institution that wishes to emphasize student achievement, satisfaction, persistence, and learning must have competent student affairs professionals who contribute to the academic mission of the institution in ways that help students and the institution realize their goals.

Successfully Engaging Students

THE LESSONS offered here are based on Project DEEP, an in-depth examination of twenty four-year colleges and universities that had higher-than-predicted graduation rates and, as demonstrated through the National Survey of Student Engagement, effective policies and practices for engaging their students.[1] The research was conducted by a twenty-four-member research team that collected data from more than 2,700 students, faculty, and staff during forty multiple-day site visits to the twenty DEEP campuses (see box). The ten lessons that follow highlight how educators in general and student affairs educators in particular can shape environments that enhance student learning. A list of questions to consider concludes each section, to prompt reflection on the lesson's application to practice.

1. Focus on student learning. Period. At educationally effective colleges and universities, the fundamental mission of student affairs, that which encompasses all of the cocurriculum, is the school's academic mission. Policies, programs, and services of these student affairs units reflect a sustained commitment to achieving the institution's desired educational outcomes. There is no debate or confusion about this, nor bemoaning perceived second-class citizenship. Student affairs staff members at these colleges and universities are partners in the educational enterprise, engaging in enriching educational opportunities for students, team teaching with faculty, and fostering student success. To that end, student affairs units hire, train, and reward staff who are committed to student learning. The range of student affairs programs at these high-performing institutions is similar to what can be found at many other colleges and universities. What distinguishes their student affairs policies and practices is the degree to which they focus on creating seamless learning environments in which the boundaries between in-class and out-of-class learning are fuzzy, if not invisible. At Miami University, for example, student life staff members consider their fundamental mission the intellectual mission of the university, and student life programs and policies emphasize intellectual growth and challenge. Miami's first-year initiative, "Choice Matters," demonstrates these commitments, as well as a thoroughgoing collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs. The goal of "Choice Matters" is to encourage students to use their time wisely and reflect systematically on what they learn from their experiences inside and outside the classroom. A variety of linked programs—curricular and cocurricular, required and optional—promote the initiative. The University of the South, known informally as Sewanee, provides a comparable model. The dean of students is a tenure-track faculty member, several members of the student life staff are regulars in the classroom, and many faculty can be found at student research presentations, in the chapel, at club events, in the coffee shops, and in the residence halls. According to the dean, "Out-of class initiatives and support services are absolutely connected to academics at this campus. We're all in the trenches in all aspects of students' lives."

Questions to Consider

Do student affairs staff and their mission, policies, programs, and practices reflect and support (1) the educational mission of the institution, (2) academic programs and priorities, and (3) students' learning and success? In what ways do they compete with these priorities?

How do students describe what they learn, how they learn, and from whom? In what ways are students' experiences consistent and inconsistent with those desired or claimed by the institution?

2. Create and sustain partnerships for learning. High-performing organizations are marked by partnerships, cross-functional collaborations, and responsive units. Faculty, staff, and students at these institutions enjoy mutual respect and share an affinity for their school's mission and culture. Effective partnerships among those who have the most contact with stu-

PROJECT DEEP COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Alverno College (Wisconsin)
California State University Monterey Bay
The Evergreen State College (Washington)
Fayetteville State University (North Carolina)
George Mason University (Virginia)
Gonzaga University (Washington)
Longwood University (Virginia)
Macalester College (Minnesota)
Miami University (Ohio)
Sweet Briar College (Virginia)
University of Kansas
University of Maine at Farmington
University of Michigan
University of Texas at El Paso
University of the South (Sewanee) (Tennesee)
Ursinus College (Pennsylvania)
Wabash College (Indiana)
Wheaton College (Massachusetts)
Winston-Salem State University (North Carolina)
Wofford College (South Carolina)

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dents—faculty and student affairs educators—fuel the collaborative spirit and positive attitude of these campuses. Cocurricular programs are designed to foster and not compete with or undercut students' academic achievement. At most educationally effective colleges, for example, the intellectual and academic content of summer orientation and fall welcome weeks far exceeds the amount of time devoted to social events. In this way, student affairs educators set an appropriate tone and expectations for college life. California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB) has developed a culture in which students, staff, and faculty are equal partners in educating students. A faculty member explained that this egalitarian model is rooted in the early years of the university, when everyone had to "roll up their sleeves [and] work on whatever needed to be done." During this time, there was little regard for position or title; members of the faculty were accustomed to providing student affairs functions for students. In a similar fashion, the collegial character of the University of Kansas is the key to a variety of desirable educational outcomes. Administrators and faculty members there described an atmosphere of collaboration and cooperation, fostered by fruitful and long-standing academic and student affairs partnerships. The word *family* was used often to describe the nature of relationships on campus.

Questions to Consider

> Do academic and student affairs offices, programs, and personnel collaborate to facilitate student success? What are the barriers to this collaboration? What factors facilitate collaboration? To what extent and in what ways do academic affairs, student affairs, faculty, staff, administrators, and students share values and assumptions about students and their learning? To what extent and in what ways do their values and assumptions about students differ? What impact, if any, do these differences have on student success?

3. Hold all students to high expectations for engagement and learning, in and out of class, on and off campus. Offering an array of opportunities for involvement from which students can choose does not constitute a meaningful student affairs contribution to student learning. Students have to *use* the resources of the setting in order to realize their benefits. Most colleges assign students to an adviser, offer some form of first-year seminar, and provide opportunities for involvement in cocurricular activities, internships, and community service. But these programs cannot have the desired impact if few students take full advantage of them. Institutions contribute to student success by making certain that programs and experiences are of uniformly high quality and that large numbers of students participate. Learning also is enhanced when students apply information and practice skills and competencies in settings beyond the classroom and when involvement in educationally purposeful experiences is the norm rather than the exception. Successful institutions do not hesitate to require students to participate in experiences, such as leadership development or multicultural awareness workshops, that have demonstrated their value for student learning. High-quality cocurricular programs should be available to and used by large numbers of students, including commuter students and students who are older than the traditional college age. The ethos of George Mason University can be stated succinctly: "We believe everyone can succeed here; our work is to bring out every student's potential." This belief is translated into clearly communicated high expectations, as well as a clear understanding of and appreciation for Mason's student population. The university sponsors more than two hundred student clubs and organizations and goes to great lengths to involve students of different ages,

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races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds in these and other out-of-class activities. The university attracts nontraditional-age students to such activities by offering academic credit for these learning experiences.

Questions to Consider

To what extent are students expected and encouraged to seek involvement in cocurricular activities? Do students seek such involvement? What is the impact on their success if they do? Do cocurricular experiences enrich student learning?

In what ways and to what extent are internships, practicums, and leadership experiences available? Are these experiences widely available to all students?

4. Implement a comprehensive set of safety nets and early warning systems. Success for all students requires timely and consistent responses to signs of difficulty in the form of complex yet readily available early warning systems. High-quality student support services consistent with the characteristics and needs of the institution's students are linked to the warning systems to make sure that students get what they need when they need it, if not before. None of these systems and services is effective in isolation; all must have the attention and draw on the resources of everyone who comes in contact with students in difficulty, including faculty, student affairs educators, professionals in residence life, and student paraprofessionals. Nor are these systems and services useful if students do not know how to use them or if students believe that using them carries a stigma. Therefore, faculty and staff at educationally effective institutions know and behave as though educating students is everyone's business and all must work together to make sure students do not fall through the cracks. On residential campuses, for example, residence life staff members are integral to an effective early warning system. They see firsthand how students spend their time and communicate relevant information to the academic advisers and faculty members who need it. Wheaton College's student life department, for example, holds weekly meetings that include residence life staff, athletics staff, and representatives from academic advising. Their objective is to identify students in need of academic or social support and to identify the most appropriate staff or faculty member to intervene. Winston-Salem State University created redundant safety nets through its First Year College and Academic Support Services division, which is the administrative home to all first-time, readmitted, and transfer students, and which encompasses advising and support services, required freshman seminars, peer advisers, and faculty-based early warning systems.

Questions to Consider

To what extent and in what ways are safety nets in the form of resources, programs, policies, practices, and structures for students in difficulty available and used? By whom are they used? Who does not use them?

Do early warning systems and safety nets work better for some students than others? If so, what can be done to increase their effectiveness for all students?

5. Teach new students what it takes to succeed. Effective colleges and universities recognize that new students need affirmation, encouragement, and support as well as information about what to do to be successful. They also know that new students need considerable structure and support to create a foundation for academic and social success and to learn how to take advantage of the institution's resources for learning. These institutions make special efforts during student recruitment, summer orientation and registration, fall welcome week, and events throughout the early weeks of college to teach newcomers about campus traditions and rituals and provide other information about "how we do things here." Students' expectations for academic challenge and engagement in educationally purposeful activities—what it means to be a successful student—are consistent with the institution's mission and educational philosophy. And these expectations, shaped from students' first contact with the institution, are consistent with what they find once they arrive on campus. Effective schools also provide guideposts to mark key transition points during college in order to channel student effort toward the right activities at the right time. Sometimes this takes the form of intrusive advising and required programs—describing to students what they need to do and when and *requiring* them to participate in activities proven to contribute to student success. Fayetteville State University's University College is an administrative unit organized to help students with varied academic preparation learn to do what is necessary to perform at acceptable levels, inside and outside the classroom. To this end, University College provides mentoring and advising for all new students and coordinates support programs for reading, mathematics, science, and critical thinking.

Questions to Consider

To what extent are resources front-loaded

What really matters in student success is that students encounter a range of perspectives that encourage them to think and respond in novel, more complex ways.

to foster new students' academic and social success? Are these experiences integrated with or tangential to the curriculum? How might they be integrated more effectively?

In what ways and to what extent do transition programs welcome and affirm all newcomers? Are first-year students expected to participate in educationally purposeful programs that are focused on adjustment to college?

6. Recognize, affirm, and celebrate the educational value of diversity. Students learn from encounters with difference. Students who report more exposure to diverse perspectives in class and out of class are also more likely to report higher levels of academic challenge, greater opportunities for active and collaborative learning, and a more supportive campus environment. Ultimately, what really matters in student success is that students encounter in their in-class and out-of-class experiences perspectives that reflect a range of human experiences and that encourage them to interact with others in ways that force them to think and respond in novel, more complex ways. High-performing schools demonstrate their commitment to diversity by socializing newcomers to this value; encouraging students to experience diversity by featuring diverse perspectives in the curriculum and cocurriculum; and recruiting and supporting students, faculty, and staff from populations that have historically been underserved by higher education. Even effective institutions whose students are homogeneous by most measures take diversity seriously. They integrate diversity experiences into undergraduate education; multiculturalism is not simply an add-on but an integral element of academic and student life. Many of Longwood University's diversity awareness initiatives take place in the residence halls. Resident assistants (RAs) help raise awareness and encourage student participation in the many events sponsored by the Office on Multicultural Affairs. Indeed, the work of Longwood RAs is integral to attaining the university's educational mission, and RAs receive helpful training and advice in order to carry out this role. As with all the other student affairs programs at Longwood, residence hall programming is organized around goals that complement and support Longwood's mission.

Questions to Consider

In what ways and to what extent are diversity experiences infused in the curriculum and cocurriculum? What are the nature and quality of students' experiences with diversity?

Are students required to participate in courses or activities that promote cross-cultural understanding? Is time for self-reflection included in such activities?

7. Invest in programs and people that demonstrate contributions to student learning and success. Where and why an institution invests its resources makes a big difference not only in what gets funded but also in messages sent about institutional priorities and values. High-performing colleges and universities allocate resources according to what matters most: effective education of students. They take on matters of substance that are consistent with their priorities and commitment to student learning, and they channel limited resources toward mission-related initiatives to promote student success. Difficult budget situations are not viewed as an excuse to suspend or retard improvement efforts. Effective institutions consider a budgeting model that places a priority on student learning processes and outcomes; the salient question is always "What will this investment of money, time, space, or staffing produce for student learning and success?" Therefore, effective colleges and universities do less of what doesn't matter for student learning and more of what does, and they encourage experimentation in the name of supporting student success. Even schools that have modest resources find and implement good ideas. For example, resources at the University of Maine at Farmington (UMF) are stretched thin. Nevertheless, its

can-do ethos and values-based decision making are levers for improvement. A senior administrator at UMF noted, "We do a lot with a little, but where you put your money speaks volumes." One example of UMF's emphasis on devoting scarce resources to student success is its Student Work Initiative program. The program was launched in 1998 with an $86,000 allocation from the UMF president; in 2003, the Student Work Initiative fund had almost doubled to $168,000. Campus jobs were created with two goals in mind: (1) to provide students with meaningful learning experiences through employment and (2) to increase persistence and graduation rates. Now about 50 percent of UMF students work on campus; the rate of student persistence to graduation has improved from 51 percent to 56 percent and continues to climb.

Questions to Consider

How are budget priorities and allocations determined?

In what ways are student affairs budget priorities and allocations consistent with the educational mission, institutional values, and student success efforts?

8. Use data to inform decisions. High-performing colleges and universities use data extensively to inform decision making. Indeed, these institutions seem to be in a perpetual learning mode, monitoring where they are, what they are doing, where they want to go, and how to maintain momentum toward positive change. For many people, the word *data* conjures daunting images of tables of numbers and complex statistical analyses. In fact, many questions relevant to student success can be answered—at least in part—with numbers, such as "How many first-time full-time students persist to graduation in six years?" Or an institution might ask, "How does academic performance differ for students who do and do not use tutoring or other academic support services?" But useful, insightful data also can come in other forms and from other sources, including personal experiences and narratives. Schools that feature student success combine anecdotes and personal experience with systematically collected information about student and institutional performance to draw data-based conclusions about the efficacy of their initiatives. Moreover, they publicly report on their performance, even when the news is bad. In the early 1990s, for example, Macalester College commissioned a retention task force to examine first-year student retention, which was about 80 percent, well below the 90 percent level to which campus leaders aspired. In response to the task force's findings, Macalester decided to require its successful but formerly optional first-year seminar course for all students and to formalize the academic advising responsibilities of the faculty members teaching the course. Other examples of data-driven decision making include Alverno College's culture of assessment, which encompasses both academic affairs and student affairs, and the University of Kansas, where a senior administrator noted, "Data drive most of the things we do."

Questions to Consider

What data related to student success and effective educational practice are collected, for what purposes, and by whom? How are they used?

What messages do community members hear about the importance of data for shaping day-to-day activities as well as broad policy decisions? To what extent are individuals and offices accountable for collecting and using reliable and valid data? To what degree do people use data to inform and evaluate decisions, policies, and practices?

9. Create spaces for learning. Strategies for fostering student success should not be limited to policies and programs but should also address the physical environments of a campus. Educationally effective colleges and universities use every opportunity—new construction, space renovation, landscape planning, campus expansion, interior design—to create spaces and settings where learning and teaching can flourish and that reflect their commitment to student engagement. Because they

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understand the importance of "place" in education, these institutions recognize the potential learning opportunities in their setting and the ways that students, institution, and community can interact for mutual benefit. For example, student services are centrally located and easy to find, and spaces for informal interaction between students and faculty or staff and among students are plentiful and accessible. George Mason University's Johnson Center, featured in the July–August 2005 issue of *About Campus,* is an entire building devoted to providing student academic services, such as tutoring, career counseling, and so forth, amid a food court, the library, and several other offices. The University of Texas at El Paso created space in its state-of-the-art science and engineering building for individuals and groups to study and meet or to host workshops and symposia, as well as to offer a comfortable place for students to relax and visit informally with other students and faculty. Physical space at Wofford College suggests that collaboration outside of class is the norm. For example, computer labs, study space, and areas outside faculty offices in Milliken Science Center and the Olin Building all are designed to encourage group interaction. Movable tables and chairs are arranged in open spaces near faculty offices, and comfortable seating that supports group study is available in Milliken Science Center and at the Acorn Cafe.

Questions to Consider

To what extent are the physical setting and structures adapted for teaching and learning? What special features and resources for learning are present? In what ways are these resources used to support learning?

Are facilities accessible to students and available at convenient times? Are gathering places readily accessible in buildings and outdoors? Who uses gathering places? When, and for what purposes? Who does not use them?

10. Make every residence hall a learning community. Students living in campus residences constitute only about 15 percent of all undergraduates. Nonetheless, for this group of students and for their commuting counterparts attending residential campuses, residence halls can be an important locus of support and intellectual vitality—or venues that compete with the educational mission of the institution—that can have a significant influence on the quality of campus life for everyone. Institutions that foster student success offer a variety of effective models, all of which share a common characteristic: their campus residences augment, complement, and enrich students' academic experiences. For example, to harness the educational advantages of the residential campus, many of these schools connect residence life programs with first-year experience courses and related activities. Residence halls at the University of Michigan also help connect and create smaller campus communities in order to ameliorate the potentially overwhelming physical and psychological size of the campus. Michigan offers a variety of opportunities for students to participate in small, theme-oriented classes, or learning communities. The courses are generally limited to first-year students and participants in various residential programs. Courses such as these blur the lines between in-class and out-of-class learning. Michigan further enhances the learning community experience by placing faculty offices in the residential college, allowing more frequent student-faculty contacts in the hallways, as well as at meals or in evening discussion groups.

Questions to Consider

To what extent are residence halls central or ancillary to the educational mission of your institution? Do residence life professionals and paraprofessionals offer programs and activities that support the educational mission, or do priorities for students compete with that mission?

Cocurricular programs should be used by large numbers of students, including commuter students and students who are older than the traditional college age.

SIX CONDITIONS AT STRONG PERFORMING INSTITUTIONS

1. A living mission and a lived educational philosophy
2. An unshakable focus on student learning
3. Environments adapted for educational enrichment
4. Clearly marked pathways to student success
5. An improvement-oriented ethos
6. Shared responsibility for educational quality and student success

Are residential and nonresidential learning communities available to address a wide variety of student needs and interests? Are these communities effective in fostering student learning and success?

Conclusion

THE LESSONS offered here are a sample of the wide-ranging practical implications of the institutional conditions found at the twenty DEEP colleges and universities. A detailed description of those conditions is beyond the scope of this article but can be found in George Kuh and his colleagues' book, *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter* (also see sidebar). One of the most instructive outcomes of Project DEEP, however, was the affirmation of a message from other studies about high-performing colleges and universities: there is no single blueprint for effectiveness. In fact, there are many roads to becoming an educationally engaging institution. What the routes taken by the DEEP schools have in common, however, is an understanding that policies, programs, and practices must be aligned with student learning and must allocate resources and personnel in ways that complement the institution's mission, values, and culture. This alignment does not happen on its own or by accident. It requires that persons or groups monitor the efficacy of current initiatives and review proposed new efforts to determine their potential for enhancing student success. Perhaps the final lesson, then, is "Know your setting and your students." Institutions or individuals who are interested in using *Student Success in College* to engage in in-depth self-assessment might also refer to *Assessing Conditions to Enhance Educational Effectiveness: The Inventory for Student Success and Engagement* by George Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, John Schuh, and Elizabeth Whitt.

Notes

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More information about DEEP and a complete list of policy and practice briefs can be found at http://education.indiana.edu/~nsse.

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