

7 STEPS FOR TAKING STUDENT LEARNING SERIOUSLY

Boards can respond to pressures to raise graduation rates by emphasizing mission-driven practices, setting benchmarks, and monitoring efforts to promote student engagement.

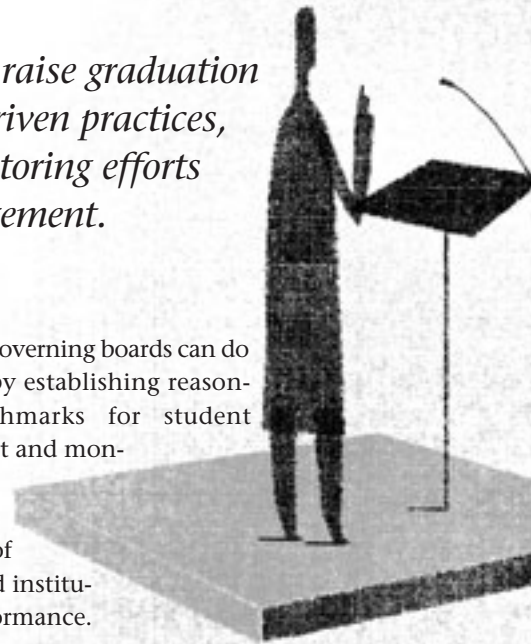
IF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES wanted students to get as much out of their college experience as possible, what should they focus on? What might governing boards do to uphold their end of the educational bargain?

Graduating more students prepared to meet the social, civic, and economic challenges of coming decades is a national priority. Indeed, institutional graduation rates are being scrutinized by state legislatures and by those in Congress drafting the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

Every college and university can improve its graduation rates and the quality of undergraduate programs by paying more attention to the conditions that matter for student success. Decades of research shows that one key factor of success is *student engagement*—the time and effort students devote to their studies and related activities. A good deal is now known about promising ways to organize classes and other learning opportunities so that students put more effort into and benefit more from such

activities. Governing boards can do their part by establishing reasonable benchmarks for student engagement and monitoring relevant indicators of student and institutional performance.

Seven Principles. To stimulate action, I offer seven suggestions for boards that want their institution to take student learning more seriously. These ideas are based on an in-depth examination of 20 diverse four-year colleges and universities that have higher than predicted graduation rates and demonstrated strong performance on the National Survey of Student Engagement (see the sidebar on page 22). The results suggest that their policies, programs, practices, and campus climates effectively challenge and support students of differing abilities and aspirations.



• BY GEORGE D. KUH •

1. *Student success is everybody's business.* There is no simple, sure-fire way to improve student engagement and graduation rates. Equally important, no single program or initiative—no matter how well designed or funded—can have the desired effect. Because students are more likely to thrive when an institution provides support from multiple sources, strong-performing institutions have developed many high-quality programs and practices, some of

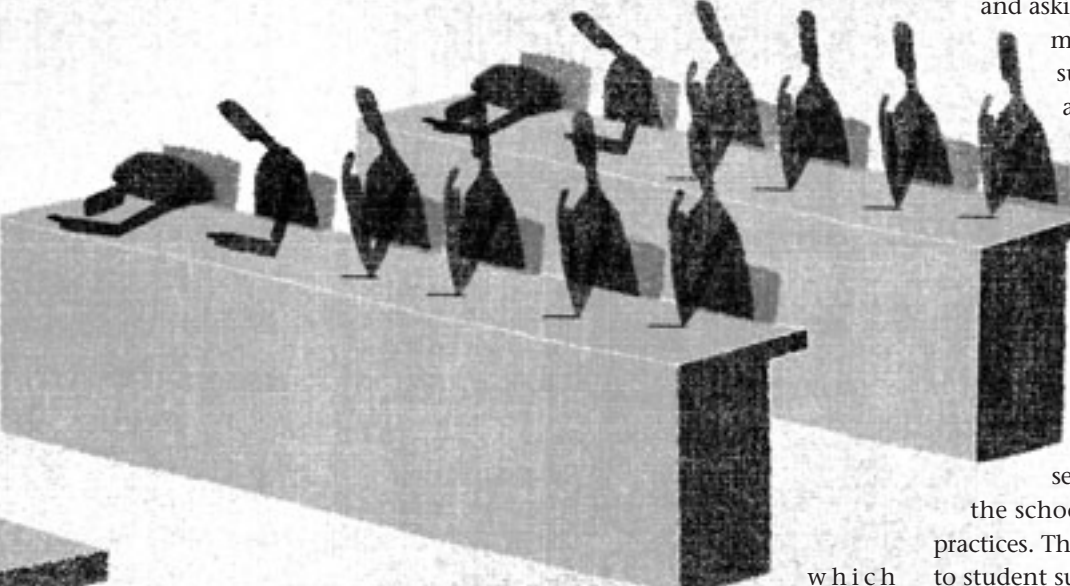
various student success initiatives. This could be a faculty or staff member with a reputation for getting things done. “In charge” parties are not necessarily expected to bring about the changes themselves, but they coordinate, prod, and support others who also are working on the issues.

Board members can demonstrate their support for collaborative, integrated programs and services by reviewing the quality of academic and campus-life policies and functions together and asking how various initiatives complement one another. To ensure that such reviews occur, the board can assess its committee structure to ensure that one of its committees is responsible for monitoring key indicators of student engagement.

2. *Make sure student success is featured prominently in the institution's mission.* Every college has two missions. The first is its espoused mission, or what it writes and says about itself. The second is its enacted mission, or what

the school does in terms of programs and practices. The enacted mission is most relevant to student success because it reflects what students *actually experience*, not what the institution promises. At strong-performing schools, the enacted mission overlaps significantly with the espoused mission. The result is that students know what they are getting into before they arrive, and faculty and staff have a clear idea of what they are working toward and trying to accomplish with their students.

For example, Alverno College, California State University at Monterey Bay, the University of Maine at Farmington, and Winston-Salem State University are dedicated to expanding educational opportunity for students who by traditional measures would be expected to struggle academically. Gonzaga University's mission emphasizes developing creativity, initiative, and intelligence within a framework of Christian reflection and interpretation. Macalester College



which target students who are at risk of leaving school prematurely. These initiatives typically are implemented by personnel across the institution working together in order to reach large numbers of students in a meaningful way.

To get faculty and staff members pushing and pulling in the same direction, leadership is needed from presidents, provosts, vice presidents, deans, and others. At Miami University of Ohio, for example, academic and student-life administrators speak with one voice in campus publications and forums to remind faculty and staff of their commitment to collaboration on behalf of student success.

Equally important, some individual or unit must be assigned the responsibility for coordinating and monitoring the status and impact of

focuses on its “four pillars” of academic excellence, multiculturalism, internationalism, and service to engage students intellectually, socially, and ethically with pressing issues of the larger community and the world.

These and other strong-performing schools systematically assess whether what they say about themselves is consistent with what they actually do and what most students experience. The board should periodically take stock of whether the institution’s enacted mission adequately emphasizes student success and whether what students do matches what admissions materials promise.

3. *Strategically invest in student learning.* Strong-performing institutions allocate resources in ways that consistently communicate that student learning is a high priority. The *amount* of an institution’s resources—faculty and staff time and facilities—is not as important as *toward what end* resources are applied and whether they effectively create powerful, affirming learning environments.

For example, discretionary dollars are in short supply at the University of Maine at Farmington. To encourage working on campus (which is correlated with persistence), the president created the Student Employment Initia-

MEASURING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

Just as MRIs allow doctors and patients to see dimensions of the human anatomy, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, pronounced “Nessie”) is a short, highly focused survey of undergraduate students that provides a window into the student experience and institutional performance. The instrument measures the extent to which students are participating in the kinds of activities that matter to their learning and personal development.

Based at the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, NSSE has three core activities:

- providing colleges and universities data to inform discussions about teaching, learning, and collegiate quality;
- discovering additional promising practices and institutional conditions that foster student learning; and
- publicly advocating on behalf of policies and discourse about institutional quality that emphasize effective educational practice as contrasted with institutional resources and reputation.

NSSE measures two essential components of student engagement. The first is what students do—the time and energy they devote to educationally purposeful activities such as studying, reading and writing, interacting with faculty members and peers inside and outside the classroom, and experiencing diversity. It also gauges the

quality of relationships formed with faculty members, administrators, and peers. The second component is what institutions do to foster student engagement—curricular emphases, pedagogy, programs, services, and properties of campus culture that induce students to take part in educationally sound activities.

NSSE annually calculates scores for participating institutions on five important indicators so that colleges and universities can better understand and regularly monitor their performance. These clusters of effective educational practices or “benchmarks” are (1) academic challenge, (2) active and collaborative learning, (3) student-faculty interaction, (4) enriching educational experiences, and (5) supportive campus environment.

Since NSSE’s inception in 2000, more than 900,000 students from about 970 different four-year colleges and universities have completed the survey, which is administered via paper or online in the spring each year to random samples of first-year students and seniors. Participating institutions receive a customized institutional report with detailed information that allows them to compare their performance against peer institutions as well as to national averages.

More information about the National Survey of Student Engagement, its annual reports, and its related initiatives can be found at www.iub.edu/~nsse. —G.D.K.

One way to determine the importance of student learning is to estimate how much time the board discusses it in relation to other matters.

tive. Now, more than half the students work on campus, and the persistence rate is increasing.

It also is important that financial plans and budgets be as transparent as possible and that these plans faithfully reflect academic priorities and institutional values. To illustrate, the University of Kansas in the early 1990s began to change the way faculty were evaluated for promotion and tenure to bring undergraduate teaching into a better balance with research productivity. One highly visible manifestation of its commitment was maintaining a large number of undergraduate classes with 30 students or fewer. Boards should review financial plans annually to keep student learning and success goals fresh.

4. Require that evidence guides policy decisions and improvement efforts. What is measured receives attention. High-performing colleges and universities systematically review campus priorities, policies, and practices to ensure that programs and practices are of acceptable quality and are consistent with their priorities and values. These examinations can be formal program reviews, self-studies (such as those prepared for accreditation visits), or cultural audits that lead to innovative curricular changes. Less formal but also effective are departmental or program-specific discussions about what is working well and what needs attention.

It also is important to report publicly on performance and build feedback loops into the curriculum and other educational policies and programs. The University of Michigan conducted six major studies of the quality of its undergraduate experience from 1985–2002, a notable demonstration of its commitment to using data to improve student learning. Boards should expect proposals for new initiatives to be

supported by evidence demonstrating how they will contribute to student success. The board also should be briefed regularly on the results of self-studies and program reviews and should insist that data-informed decision making becomes “the way we do business here.”

5. Include student success indicators in the president’s performance review. Through their words and deeds, institutional leaders signal to their colleagues the relative importance of undergraduate education. Regardless of whether the institution also features graduate education and funded research, presidents must speak persuasively about undergraduate success and the institution’s short-term and long-term plans to improve teaching and learning. They also must believe in and act on what they say.

Presidents can use annual state-of-the-campus reports, governing board meetings, alumni gatherings, convocations, and faculty meetings to remind people of the institution’s aspirations and its commitment to provide a high-quality undergraduate experience. The board should look for results of such pronouncements and incorporate appropriate indicators of the quality of the collegiate experience when evaluating the chief executive’s performance.

6. Review board priorities with student success in mind. Just as presidents and senior administrators should be held accountable for institutional indicators of student success, the board should annually reflect on both the importance and the quality of undergraduate education. Simply put, boards should hold themselves accountable in terms of student success.

One way to determine the importance of student learning is to estimate how much time board members spend annually discussing student engagement, learning outcomes, persistence, and graduation rates relative to other matters. In addition to monitoring these indicators, board discussions with students about their experiences can prompt insights into what the numbers mean. Taking student success seriously requires processes and structures that ensure that the institution is making

progress toward ambitious goals.

7. *Stay the course.* Colleges and universities do not become high performing overnight. Generally, they are blessed with administrators, faculty members, and student-life professionals who work on high-priority initiatives for extended periods to demonstrate, extend, and enhance their impact. Champions for change may be veteran faculty or administrators.

The provost at the University of Kansas presided over his institution's persistent effort to better balance research and teaching in the reward system. The Miami University vice president for student affairs worked with his counterparts in academic affairs over several years to establish a variety of high-quality collaborations that enrich the undergraduate experience. Because the academic dean at Evergreen State College had graduated from the school, his knowledge of the institution and its founding values were instrumental in helping to maintain continuity and fidelity among the college's mission, educational philosophy, policies, and practices.

Sometimes newcomers can be asked to lead the way. A new academic dean or student-life officer may have fresh ideas for better integrating students' in-class and out-of-class experiences. There is no substitute for deep, abiding commitments of time and talent, and the governing board should go out of its way to acknowledge such efforts.

Questions to Consider. Although there is no blueprint for creating a student-success-oriented institution, thinking about how these suggestions may apply to your institution's mission, context, and culture and could make a difference in student learning.

- To what extent does the institutional mission—espoused and enacted—unmistakably emphasize student success?
- Where do students and their learning fall among the board's interests and priorities? Is a standing committee dedicated to student learning and campus life?
- What institutional and student-performance

indicators are used to inform board decisions?

- Who is responsible for maintaining an institutional focus on student success and reporting on key indicators to the board?
- How does the institution's spending plan enhance student learning and success? Are modest resources available to support trying out good ideas?
- Where among the president's priorities do students, their learning, and their success fall? What does the president say and do in the name of promoting student success and the conditions that are associated with student success? What student success indicators are included in the president's annual performance review?
- Do other institutional leaders persuasively communicate the importance of students and the educational mission of the institution?
- Does the culture of the board encourage or discourage open, productive dialogue about matters related to student success?

Who's Successful? One final note: Descriptions of different types of strong-performing institutions are available in the just-released book, *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*, which outlines six properties and conditions shared by the profiled colleges and universities. The book also discusses 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. A companion volume, *Inventory for Student Engagement and Success*, will be available in fall 2005, providing a template for institutions to use to identify areas of institutional functioning that can be improved to promote student success. ♦

George D. Kuh (kuh@indiana.edu) is chancellor's professor and director of the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University. Research for this article was conducted with support from the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Center for Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. The views expressed are solely those of the author.