



DEFINING STUDENT SUCCESS DATA RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

Introduction

Student success is more than a buzzword. It is a driving force behind policy and institutional change efforts underway in postsecondary education. Ewell and Wellman (2007) state that in its simplest form, student success can be understood as “getting students into and through college to a degree or certificate” (p. 2). As a movement, student success has become intricately linked with the completion agenda, emerging from concerns regarding the U.S. falling behind in degree attainment internationally, issues of institutional funding and rising student debt, increasing numbers of students leaving with debt and no credentials, and ongoing employer needs to find qualified workers.

Completion is the word of the day, with persistence, retention, graduation and job placement rates of first-time, full-time students data leading the conversation. Initiatives abound to address the achievement gap between those who complete a credential in a timely fashion and those who do not. Further, the completion agenda has been bolstered by national calls from policy makers and foundations alike to raise the overall rate of degree attainment (Lumina Foundation, 2017a; Fry, 2017; Obama, 2009). As Karen Stout, President of Achieving the Dream states, “Completion. It’s a word that’s used a lot when people discuss student success” (Nazerian, 2018).

Yet, there are debates among those with a seemingly shared agenda around completion. As Randy Stiles and co-authors (2018) state, there is “evolving thinking about the meaning of student success. While persistence and completion rates are important and easily measured outcomes for colleges and universities, these statistics are strongly related to the institutional mission and resources, the demographics of the student body, and the lives and

motivations of both the students and the faculty.” The measures used to determine student success differ with the perspective, as do the methods used to help students reach attainment measures. Add to that, success may well be defined differently by students, administrators, and policy makers. Further, a variety of institutions have stated that the measures used in the completion agenda do not address or capture the majority of students who enter their doors and that institutions are being held accountable for measures that do not align with their mission or their student population.

Institutions have responded to concerns around student success as tied to completion through increasing attention on teaching and learning, adding support structures and resources to assist students along the path to completion, and disaggregating data to better understand the needs and educational paths of students served. Yet, institutions and systems, as well as success measures, are not built for the students of today or how they interact with postsecondary education as opposed to individual

institutions. While some efforts have emerged to provide better measures of completion, such as the work of the Student Achievement Measure (SAM), which tracks student movement across institutions to provide a more complete picture of student progress and completion within postsecondary education, what is needed is a different conversation and examination of student success for today's learners.

Who Are Today's Learners?

The learners of today are diverse and engage with the postsecondary system in a fluid manner. They are not just going to college, but working, raising families, and engaging with their communities. The American Council on Education states that post-traditional learners represent as much as 60% of enrolled undergraduates, experiencing issues with child care, financial aid, and suboptimal transfer pathways (Soares, Gagliardi, & Nellum, 2017). They also enroll at multiple institutions, engaging with the system, not a single institution. The U.S. Department of Education (2017) reports a higher number, stating that 74% of all undergraduates have at least one non-traditional characteristic; 66% transfer between institutions; and 63% are first generation.

A Lumina Foundation report (2017b) on today's students, states that 18- to 21-year-olds make up just one third of the college population, that 40% of students attend class part time, and that almost half are financially on their own and/or struggling to make ends meet, with 42% of first-year students living near or below the poverty line.

In a 2017 survey of more than 33,000 students, half of community college students reported housing insecurity and two in three students were food insecure (Wolff-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018). Research by the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (Owens, Thrill, & Rockey, 2017) states that community college students represent 45% of all learners, and more than half of Native American, Hispanic, and Black students enrolled in postsecondary studies. Right now, 60% need at least one developmental course and they lack knowledge on how to navigate college successfully. The students of today balance a complex set of responsibilities and require more flexible course offerings.

All to say, the learners of today are far from the student population for whom the institutions were designed decades ago.

Navigating institutions not designed for their success has proved difficult for learners, especially when their

definitions of success differ from the institution. The Community College Libraries & Academic Support for Student Success (CCLASS) project examined student goals, challenges, and needs from the student perspective. In spring 2018, they conducted semi-structured interviews with students at seven partner community colleges on student objectives and goals, definitions of success, challenges faced, and coursework practices. The key findings included that students viewed community colleges as places that fit their complex lives and needs, that students held complex definitions of success including both career and completion goals as well as personal growth and development goals, yet they also faced significant challenges related to balancing work, finances, school, childcare, transportation, and navigation of resources and services (Wolff-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018, p. 3). The students of today encounter multiple barriers at once, experience apprehension in asking for help and/or are unaware of available resources.

Where students struggled the most was related to balancing competing interests such as balancing work and school, finances, childcare arrangements, adjusting to a new language, transportation to and from the college, and navigating resources and services at the college. Due to working multiple jobs, students found it difficult to schedule appointments with advisors, testing centers, and other offices on campus (Wolff-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018).

In such a complex landscape of competing priorities, student success is not just about getting students to and through, but about redesigning institutions to support students in the complex interplay of their lived experience.

Yet, the data on progression of students through college and their financial or employment condition after leaving does not directly address the barriers and/or priorities that college student's value (Student Connections, 2017a). In essence, offering resources does not mean that students are supported. The support needs to be available to them when they need it, in the form they need it, and not based on institutional convenience.

So how do today's students view success? They have multiple goals that change and shift at different times. At some times they are focused on career and/or educational achievement including getting good grades, obtaining a degree, achieving financial security, and advancing within careers. They may start at one institution with certain

intents and move to another with different goals. But has higher education served them well within a success as completion conversation?

What Are the Implications of the Completion Agenda to the Current Conversation on Student Success?

The current conversation around student success as completion has privileged certain types of learners and behavioral norms for what a “good student” does. This leads to institutional responses that are at times helpful, and at others, unhelpful to the goal of increased completion and success. Current completion metrics do not capture the work unfolding within institutions of higher education to support learners, focusing instead on the institution as the metric of success – meaning a student is only deemed successful upon completion from a particular institution – not from the various educational experiences with which they engaged with along the way to successfully achieve goals from the system of postsecondary education as a whole.

The focus on completion has implications for institutional behaviors. Typically, the most common challenges institutions hope to solve through success initiatives are retention and increased student success in the first-year through the use of bridge programs, learning communities, early alert systems. These are institutional goals for success and York and associates (2017) found that there were no correlations between the number of strategies employed and evidence of increased completion (p. 10).

One way of thinking about institutional interest in student success beyond attainment of specific completion measures is the way it is guiding institutional strategies throughout higher education, leading to enhanced record keeping based in deeply traditional metrics of student populations served by postsecondary education (DePaul, 2018). However, Smith (2018) reported that higher education would be better served “by examining and investing in the needs of the adult population and those students who have no choice but to go part-time because of work and family responsibilities.” In essence, current models and research approaches result in limiting “the distinctive cultural, perceptual, and material realities that affect underserved student populations” (Ewell & Wellman, 2007, p. 13).

Currently used completion metrics and approaches privilege not only certain types of learners, but also certain types of institutions and programs. For instance, community and technical colleges do not fare as well as traditional four-year institutions in completion metrics in

part because most of their students are working adults and not first-time, full-time students. For competency-based education programs, there are no widely accepted metrics of progress and most have reverted to cross-walking to credit hours and alternative conceptions of retention (Parsons & Rivers, 2017) despite arguments that student learning itself can serve that purpose (Johnstone, Ewell, Paulson, 2010).

A report by Civitas Learning (2018) reminds us that in the metrics used to examine student success, the vast majority of efforts are focused on the first-year students with few resources targeted to those near graduation. Yet there is a need to focus on the end of the educational journey as well. They found that nearly one in five students with 75% of coursework completed do not persist to the end, with successful transfer without loss of credits proving difficult. The Civitas Learning report argues that institutions need to take a more nuanced view of the success of part-time students to nudge them towards the 15 to finish campaign endorsed by Complete College America. However, that approach does not take into consideration the circumstances of the students. Smith (2018) states that 62% of students over the age of 25 took less than 12 credits a term, with 21% taking between 12 and 14. Only 17% of adult students took 15 credits, meaning this strategy does not meet students where they are because “we’re not going to get people in an older demographic to go full-time” (Smith, 2018). What is needed is an understanding of the students of today, models to support their growth and development, along with institutional responses that align with institutional missions as well as the students served.

Technology to Enhance Completion

To reach completion goals, institutions are increasingly using technology through the form of early alert systems and predictive analytics. Stiles and Wilcox (2016) define learning analytics as the measurement, collection, analysis, and reporting of data about learners and their contexts. This is done for purposes of understanding and optimizing the learning environments in which it occurs. Depending on the data that go into the models, certain elements become possible options for interventions. However, Ekowo & Palmer (2016) caution that “without intending to, schools can use algorithms that in the end only pinpoint students who are traditionally ‘at-risk’: underserved populations. If the algorithms used to target at-risk groups are a product of race or socio-economic status, some students could be unfairly directed to certain types of majors, adding to unequal opportunity in society” (p. 14-15).

Thus, a holistic approach to analysis of student experiences, involving their voices and thoughts with issues of equity at the forefront is needed because attrition is shaped by many connected and related factors.

While student affairs are called on to implement intervention strategies after the identification of at-risk students in such models, student engagement data are not often included in predictive models. Amelia Parnell and colleagues (2018) examined institutional use of data and analytics for student success and found that 95% of institutions conducted student success studies focused on pipeline and academic progress and success, mainly with a focus upon first-year students. However, few were integrating their student data to achieve a holistic picture. Even if there is access to such data, it is not universally understood what the data mean” let alone what to do with it (Gagliardi & Turk, 2017, p. 10). Thus, most systems are reactive, not proactive for success and put proverbial bumpers around learners instead of examining institutional processes and structures for foundational changes. [Yanosky and Brooks (2013) point to the PAR Student Success Matrix as a means to make connections between predictions of student risk with selected interventions to find effectiveness with particular groups of students under particular circumstances.]

The consequences of the focus upon the completion agenda leads to potentially negative behaviors or implementation of under explored analytic models to address “leaks in the educational pipeline” with little understanding of today’s learners or the implications of such approaches to issues of equity, learner agency, institutional type, and/or mission. As a consequence, under the current conversation on student success as completion, there is value to the institution to have students leave with a credential so that they can be “counted” as a success. Some institutions are locating a leak in the pipeline where students exit an institution and developing a credential at point of departure to ensure that their completion numbers improve regardless of individual student intent or goals (Parker, Gulson, & Gale, 2017).

What is needed is an examination of these interventions to determine if they are appropriate for the students. Are institutions asking learners to conform to the systems or are institutions attempting to redesign themselves for student success? To what extent is the success-focus driven by institutional success rather than student success?

Changing the Conversation on Student Success

Stiles and Wilcox (2016) argue that student success should be about demonstrating an ability to deliver an outstanding education that enables students to learn, thrive, complete their degrees at high rates, and find meaningful work. As George Kuh (2014) argues, all stakeholders do all want the same thing – an undergraduate experience that leads to high levels of learning and personal development for all students, along with higher persistence, graduation and satisfaction rates within higher education – and it takes the proverbial village to attain it. So how does the conversation on student success that has been driven by completion metrics focused on individual institutions and institutional success change?

Theoretical Underpinnings

Jillian Kinzie and George Kuh (2016) argue that student success can infer individual achievement, group achievement, and/or college impact and effectiveness, with multiple theoretical approaches informing the understanding of student success at various levels. There are a variety of theories on student success, development, and persistence that explore fit, integration, social capital, human capital, access, affordability, quality, career readiness, labor outcomes, attainment, social mobility, well-being, progress, and transfer to name a few (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010; Mayhew, et al, 2016). Adult learning identity is a dynamic relationship between the characteristics of learners and the structures of postsecondary education (Kasworm, 2007).

Yet, with all this being known, implementation of what works is uneven across institutions and among student populations. Instead, institutions usually implement piecemeal short-term initiatives with disconnected success programs leading to ‘solutionitis’ the problem of ‘doing something, anything, to and for students’ ” (Kinzie, & Kuh, 2016, p. 13). A more useful approach is to adapt local initiatives to address the needs of target student populations in ways that are appropriate to the institutional context. Peter Ewell and Jane Wellman (2007) reinforce this point. They point out that measures of success should be determined by the problems that are trying to be solved, determining what works for whom under what circumstances. They argue that such an approach allows for an alignment and coordination of efforts to collectively improve student success, avoiding what they state are simplistic measures or one-size-fits-all solutions—because the most effective solutions will vary across student populations and institutional contexts.

Institutions should be empowered to act on what they know works for their student population in their specific context and setting, as opposed to focusing on individual efforts in short-term projects or initiatives.

By examining the components of a larger student success agenda of postsecondary education system alignment, institutions avoid missing the process improvements made along the way that are currently not captured in pipeline metrics. Recognizing the interplay of a variety of complex and multi-faceted measures (Robinson, Wilcox, & Stiles, 2017), institutions are also positioned to add elements to the models of student success such as pedagogical design or context, changing student circumstances, student interest and intent, motivation, self-efficacy, and ability to continue their education. Thus, while completion is an important component of student success, equally important is “engaging in educational experiences associated with acquiring proficiencies that equip students for life and work” coupled with questioning the notion “that when students succeed it is due to institutional policies and practices but when students do not persist it is because of something the student did or did not do” (Kinzie & Kuh, 2016, p. 17).

To change the conversation, institutions need to involve students as partners in the process of understanding the barriers they face coupled with meaningful data to better understand their pathways and opportunities. York and colleagues (2017) argue that “...there is no magic bullet. Increasing student success is a complex problem and requires a long-term commitment to addressing that complexity... continuously adapted to meet changes in student characteristics and technological advances” (p. 16).

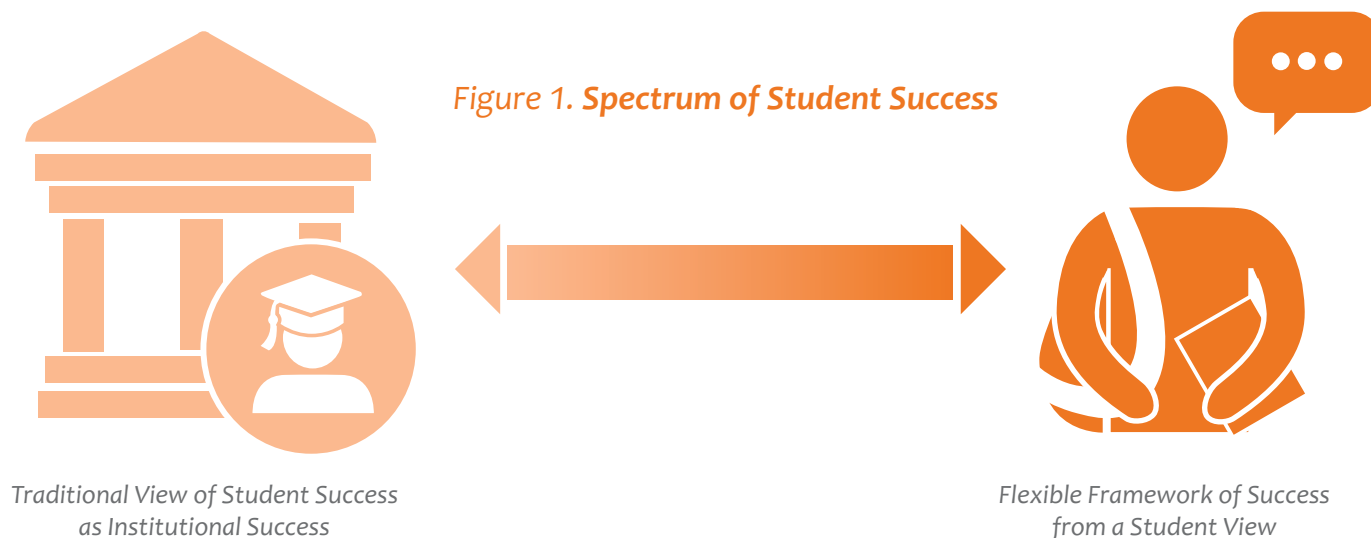
Thus, a wider lens allows a move away from judging institutions on completion metrics that force learners to choose between their competing priorities while they engage with a system as opposed to individual institutions, knowing that college isn’t the destination but part of a pathway to something else (Soares, Gagliardi, & Nellum, 2017).

An Alternative View

So how do stakeholders lead with student success in mind? The current conversation is reactive to inappropriate metrics focused on institutional success through persistence, retention, and graduation rates without clear alternatives. A different conversation could focus on a flexible framework that provides an alternative to current approaches and metrics by focusing on the students served as well as institutional success by examining processes in place to support diverse learners alongside institutionally appropriate metrics. Thinking of success conversations as falling along a spectrum, ranging from individual institutional success to individual student success (Figure 1), different conversations can emerge that provide a middle ground.

This paper has explored the issues of operating at the left end of the spectrum where institutions are deemed successful within the completion agenda conversation. On the right end of the spectrum is success based on the individual needs and goals of specific learners. However, this end does not provide a meaningful way forward either, as individual students’ desires, goals, and needs change over time. Karen Stout claims that students define success differently, with some students stating that success is as straightforward as being able to get to

Figure 1. Spectrum of Student Success



class every day, while some students are not thinking about getting the degree, but obtaining the skills and competencies needed for their next step whether it is a career or further education (Nazerian, 2018). Students also define success as making enough money to support themselves and their family and doing what makes them happy (Student Connections, 2017b). In addition, self-reports of intended goals are problematic for learners that are unfamiliar with the educational system, as students upon entry may be unaware of their goals or may indicate upon enrollment that they desire a degree for purposes of financial aid, but may be focused on acquiring specific knowledge and skills as opposed to a degree. Further, simply measuring student intent and goal realization alone is problematic due to misalignment between institutional goals and the context of personal circumstances of individual students. However, this does not mean that student intent should be ignored entirely.

A space in the middle provides a way forward for student success conversations and examines how institutions are operating as part of a larger postsecondary education system, in which students engage in and navigate across, with success of their students an integral part of their institutional design. A systems view allows for institutions to get recognition for their contribution in the educational journey of the student of today. In the U.S. Department of Education (2017) technology Higher Education supplement, they argue:

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Historically, higher education has been viewed through the lens of its institutions and our public dialogue has been framed by these categorizations. We have tended to consider students by the type of institution they attend: for example, “community college students,” “Ivy League students,” or “graduate school students.” This may cause us to inadvertently assume that students in those institutional categories are largely similar and overlook the circumstances of many students’ lives that are incompatible with the current scheduling, course sequencing, financial aid offerings, and other structural constraints imposed by this system.

This can unintentionally present higher education as easily available to everyone, located in a specific place, taking place formally over discrete periods of time, and mostly optional for workforce advancement and may also cause us to overlook and undervalue learning experiences that occur apart from discrete, formal institutional experiences. Because of this, whether a student succeeds in higher education may be determined more by the student’s ability to navigate institutional structures than by their academic potential (p. 6).

A systems view can be particularly useful to assure student success and embrace the complexity of the relationships between the circumstances of students and their subsequent success within the educational system. Wagner and Longanecker (2016) share a predictive analytics approach where institutions exchange information and are able to benchmark with each other to identify practices that generated desired results. Viewing data from a systems view was particularly useful because “viewing normalized data through a multi-institutional lens and using complete sets of undergraduate data based on a common set of measures with common data definitions leads to insights that are not typically available when looking at records from a single institution” (Wagner & Longanecker, 2016, p. 55). This sharing allowed for the matching of interventions with the causes as well as the ability to measure the impact of success programs. As they argue, “predicting who and why someone is at academic risk is necessary but insufficient for responding to the complexities of postsecondary success. Predictions that are not linked to treatments that have been shown to make a difference for the diagnosed risk are empty exercises” (p. 57). In this way technology is viewed a tool, not the solution, but one that could support a systems view of learner success.

Possible Success Framework with Students at the Center

A flexible framework is needed because as Kuh and colleagues (2010) state, there is no one way to define student success. In their examination of 20 different institutions they found different policies, histories, supports, and approaches dependent upon cultural systems and student success mindsets and approaches.

So, what might be considered in a framework to change the conversation on student success? To begin:

1. Clear understanding of the student population served along with their needs;
2. Regular and ongoing involvement of students in the process of designing supports and making sense of data;
3. Clarity of process on the part of institutions to select and implement approaches that align with students that build upon and inform research; and
4. Examination of what works and for whom and under what circumstances to achieve success.

Clarity of Processes

To bolster institutional student success efforts, institutions need to be transparent regarding 1) the existing supports and processes, 2) why they are implementing the things they are, and 3) what students are supposed to be getting from them.

Not all institutions will be in a position to serve all students well. Thus, transparency and clarity in the processes, practices, and intentions, as well as the roles of learners and the institution, is needed to inform decisions regarding selected success practices (Jankowski, 2017). Student success within an alternative systems framework is more than criteria or metrics – it is an organizational process and mindset around success for the students served, informed by a deep understanding of the learners, along with their active involvement in selecting solutions that work for them. It becomes the guiding principles that drives the work. Institutions need data on who their learners are and why they are doing the things they are to support them that is informed by the literature on best practices for different student populations (Soares, Gagliardi, & Nellum, 2017). If there is not literature on best practices for those student populations, then the institutions need to be the voice that elevates what works for whom under particular circumstances.

The examination of why institutions are doing the things they are aligns with the move towards becoming a student ready college as outline by McNair and colleagues (2016). They write that, as opposed to having students be “college ready”, institutions need to prepare for students. This approach requires a shift from examining what students lack and how to have them navigate the systems to explore what institutions and educators can do to provide high-quality learning environments. Under such an approach, institutions are held accountable for their responsibility to create the necessary conditions to

foster success by selecting appropriate programs and supports, defining learning outcomes, and assessing learner achievement of them throughout the educational journey (Maki, 2017). Intentionality of design matters more than resources or money alone (Wellman, 2010). As Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) argue, the “greatest impact appears to stem from students’ total level of campus engagement, particularly when academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular involvements are mutually reinforcing” (p. 647). The importance of integration of efforts cannot be understated, because “learning environments are successful depending on the degree to which the various elements are aligned” (Jankowski, 2017, p. 2).

Possible Measures and Approaches

While process measures and information on design decisions provide one avenue of review of student success, there is still a need for measures or approaches for documenting student success.

Stiles, Wilcox, and Robinson (2018) present a variety of factors that can impact student success and retention including academic rigor, location, mental health, social/psychological factors, high school preparation, social climate, and substance use and abuse. In addition, there are human elements to implementation of structural changes and supports, and issues of professional development for faculty on effective pedagogies with research undertaken by the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) pointing toward the key role of effective instruction in student success.

Potential additional measures to consider in a student success framework include attainment of learning outcomes, personal satisfaction and goal/intent attainment, job placement and career advancement, civic and life skills, social and economic well-being, and commitment to lifelong learning. While these are all elements that people have argued in the past should be considered, few have proposed concrete approaches or measures for these constructs (Ewell & Wellman, 2007). With such a wide lens of potential data sources, how is one to proceed in a manner that is cost effective, doesn’t add additional levels of reporting or bureaucracy, reinforces student agency, and encompasses data that are attainable by institutions?

One approach is to allow institutions to select measures focused on the learning environment and supports, after-learning experience success, and process measures of the educational journey. Some example measures are provided in Table 1. The institutions in the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Testing Student Success Data Initiative provided examples of the types of measures

that could encompass a flexible framework of selection for institutions as they define their success metrics. Such an approach would allow institutions the opportunity to explore their processes and design, and then select the measures that align with their mission, student population, and intended efforts. It allows for an understanding of who is served, how they are served, and what measures are used to examine the processes and practices. Institutions that identify similar measures could serve as collective benchmarking communities of practice.

Potential Benefits

A flexible framework, focused on what works and for whom and under what circumstances, allows for adaptability across delivery format and student population. By assisting institutions in identifying why they undertake their processes, who their students are, what is intended by various efforts – along with identifying their potential peer institutions to they might learn from – this work becomes integrated, part of a larger system, and done in

- partnership with learners. A review process could include an examination of success process selection:
- Who are the learners and what are their intents?
 - Why does the institution think these specific processes for these specific students will lead to success?
 - How were students actively engaged in the solution and process?

In this sense, student success is more than metrics and interventions; it is a mindset that guides the work and decisions. Pooling the data would also allow for a systems view, so while institutions identify their processes and measures, regional accreditors and policy makers could help to argue for success from a systems view. Disaggregating data by the diverse learners also allows for more than one type of student to be successful. The interconnected, complex, and developmental connections of success for the students of today through evidence-informed design would occur. It also allows for

Table 1. Sample Categories and Example Measures of Success

Learning Environment and Supports	Exit Point Outcomes and Measures	External Measures	Systems Measures
Processes for determining supports and success of support offerings	Attainment of institutional goals	Successful transfer and number of credits retained	Disaggregated data on student variables
Prior-learning acceptance/transfer intake	Learning outcomes Attainment	Entry into and completion of further education	Credential Landscape
Student satisfaction and engagement	Graduation	Employment or advancement	Employer satisfaction
Retention and persistence	Return on investment	Debt/Default rate	Community and civic engagement
Institution-specific variables on context, setting, and student population	Non-cognitive skill attainment	Licensure pass rates	Well-being

life-long and life-wide learning in and out of educational settings, where students are the agents of their own learning and are enabled to document their learning and success in ways that can be applied to further education or employment. As Joseph Smith, then director of the Office of Educational Technology stated, “It is impossible to redesign students to fit into a system, but we can re-design a system for students. This can be the difference between success or failure for our students that need the promise of higher education the most” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). In essence, it is about redesigning the educational process for learners to be successful while using the postsecondary system, along with ensuring success in the paths that occur after – such as further education and employment.

The Road Ahead

This paper serves as a conversation starter and offers one possible way forward. There are many challenges to moving the conversation forward on student success. Completion agenda metrics form the basis of most institutional reporting to larger required data sets, and institutions sit at the nexus of competing quality and compliance requirements from specialized accreditors, unions, states, regional accreditors, and other policies around success and learning. Wagner and Longanecker (2016) argue that everyone on a campus needs to increase their fluency with data-driven decision-making to achieve improvement and student success. Thus, there are professional development needs and time required to have meaningful conversations on intentional design with today’s students in mind, and there are many competing interests and initiatives on college and university campuses that draw attention away from redesign efforts. Rarely do institutions receive feedback at the time needed from peers or accreditation agencies for the efforts they are focused on at a particular time – even reporting cycles work against a connected and systems view at times. In addition, there are policy limitations on financial aid and full-time status, the credit hour structure, and inability of institutions to afford technology that may assist with better understanding of their students. Gagliardi and Turk (2017) state that “at the state and federal policy levels, data that are required for the purposes of funding allocations and accountability are often out of touch with contemporary students and institutional realities” (p. 2). However, in a Lumina Foundation (2018) report on student aid, Thaddeus L. Price Jr. of Morgan State University was quoted on student success, “our challenge is: How do we find resources? How do we find a way...and if we can’t find a way, we’ve got

to make a way. If we can’t make a way, then we’ve got to *become* the way.” There are always barriers and challenges to change, but there is also much at stake and much to be learned if stakeholders engage in a different conversation on student success. This paper does not provide the answers, but it does provide a space for dialogue on a different conversation around student success – how it could be different and what it could entail if student success conversations fundamentally are about students.

Future Considerations

Current discussions and measures of student success are based on a construct that does not represent students now enrolled in U.S. postsecondary education institutions. The conversation must shift. This is especially true for the organizations that lead in quality assurance. Students of today need to be recognized as different; student intent varies and may not include degree attainment (which is required by federal financial aid); and students need new services, flexible timetables, child care, food banks, and accessible technologies. Students of today must be seen as not part of the problem, but part of the solution to student success efforts.

The following questions are offered as critical elements of the new conversation when examining an institution on student success:

- Does the institution know and understand its various student bodies (including their intents and goals), the communities it serves, and the communities its graduates will serve?
- Is the institution student-ready and transparent about who it can and cannot serve well?
- Can the institution collect, protect, and analyze data related to its students’ success, making sense of the data with students?
- How has the institution aligned its processes, practices, culture, and related measures of success to the students it actually serves?
- Given existing funding constraints, how is the institution moving from boutique or siloed approaches addressing student success to collectively integrated, intentional, and systematic approaches?
- Can the institution explain to various interested audiences why it is doing the things it is for the students it has and document that they work?



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One initiative resulting from the grant is the development of HLC's Defining Student Success Data Initiative. It is comprised of representatives from institutions and national organizations that are focused on student success. This group met repeatedly and identified three main areas in which HLC might be able to contribute to the student success conversation:

- Defining Student Success Data: Recommendations for Changing the Conversation
- Defining Student Success Data: Recommendations for Perspectives on Accreditation.
- Defining Student Success Data: Recommendations for a Glossary of Terms.

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About The Higher Learning Commission: The Higher Learning Commission (hlcommission.org) accredits approximately 1,000 colleges and universities that have a home base in one of 19 states that stretch from West Virginia to Arizona. HLC is a private, nonprofit regional accrediting agency. HLC's mission is to assure and advance the quality of higher learning.

About Lumina Foundation: Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation committed to increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Lumina's outcomes-based approach focuses on helping to design and build an equitable, accessible, responsive and accountable higher education system while fostering a national sense of urgency for action to achieve Goal 2025.