

You read **INSIDE HIGHER ED...**
and so do 350,000+ forward-looking professionals.
Tell our readers about your open jobs for just \$150



Sept. 27, 2005

Student Success at Public Colleges

In recent years, educators and policy makers – prodded in part by scrutiny from politicians — have paid increasing attention not only to student “access” but to student “success.” That is, they have expanded their focus from ensuring a higher education for as many Americans from as wide a range of backgrounds as possible to ensuring that as many of those students as possible actually get a degree once they’re in college.

As colleges have been held increasingly accountable for their graduation rates and other measures of student success, researchers and policy groups have issued a plethora of studies and reports aimed at figuring out why some institutions seem to do a significantly better job graduating their students, even than other colleges with comparably qualified student bodies.

That is just the puzzle on which three groups – the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the Education Trust, and the National Association of System Heads – seek to shed light in [“A Matter of Culture and Leadership: Student Success in State Colleges and Universities,”](#) which they are releasing today.

The report grew out of the Graduation Rate Outcomes Study undertaken by the three groups, in which they sought to mine the Education Trust’s [College Results Online](#) database to understand “why some institutions report much higher success rates than similarly situated institutions and to use this knowledge to provide guidance to campus leaders about how to improve their own graduation outcomes.”

The groups identified six institutions that had maintained high graduation rates for a long period of time, and six others that had shown significant improvement in their rates between 1997 and 2002. The associations sent teams of officials from other colleges to assess each of the 12 institutions — which, while all are publicly funded state universities, range from relatively small institutions that focus primarily on teaching, like Truman State University and Virginia State University, to major research institutions such as Clemson University.

While all of the institutions have succeeded in keeping students moving toward their educational goals and adopted a range of programs and policies toward that end, the report concludes that the colleges’ success is “more a product of an overarching shared culture” – typically driven by strong leadership from the very top of the institution – “than it is the result of a narrowly conceived, deliberate ‘retention effort.’”

The report briefly describes the sorts of first-year academic programs, learning communities, and tutoring approaches that institutions have adopted, but most of it is dedicated to trying to “unpack” what it is about the institutions’ culture and leadership that contributes to their success – and that other institutions might emulate.

The groups’ study finds several major cultural traits that characterized the 12 institutions they examined.

First, the colleges set high expectations for students. Although half of the institutions had recently raised their admissions standards, the report emphasizes that several of the high-performing colleges admit most of the students who apply, and that the real key is that the 12 institutions made the success of all students a central goal, for the students and themselves. “What really distinguishes many of these campuses is the pervasive belief that demography is not destiny: all of the students they admit have the potential to graduate, and they should all be held to high levels of expectation,” the report states.

At Elizabeth City State University, for example, “faculty members treat students as they would want someone to treat their own children—greeting them with a smile, being honest with them, and ‘kicking butts’ when needed,” the report says.

The high expectations on these campuses extend beyond students, the authors contend: Faculty and staff members are expected to play a central role in monitoring the academic progress of their students – and faculty involvement is especially crucial at institutions where most students commute and “faculty contact in the classroom may be the only ‘human face’ of the institution students typically see. Another trait viewed as crucial to helping build a culture for student success on these campuses is the ability to create a common sense of purpose and mission that helps bind students to the institution. That kind of atmosphere is common at small liberal arts institutions, the authors note, but transplanting such a culture to “the seemingly less fertile ground of the AASCU commuter institution” can be a challenge.

The institutions managed to create a sense of “belonging,” the report says, through a mix of tactics, policies and practices, including emphasizing the importance of student success in the faculty hiring process (Truman State University specifically searches for instructors who attended small liberal arts colleges as undergraduates and “takes particular care to orient new faculty into the ‘liberal arts and sciences culture’ that the institution seeks to foster) and doing little things that make students feel connected (such as “feed the students” days at which professors at California State University Stanislaus and the University of Northern Iowa cook for students).

And at the City University of New York’s John Jay College of Criminal Justice, students and staff members coalesce around the institution’s distinctive mission of preparing and training fire fighters, police officers and other public servants.

Strong leadership is the other element that the 12 institutions had in common, according to the AASCU study. The authors make it clear that they’re not talking about the kind of flashy, surface-deep leadership that tends to bring chief executives attention in higher education and elsewhere (though the presidents of these institutions don’t necessarily lack charisma, the report says).

“What tended to set leadership apart for visiting teams at these institutions were two qualities that were less spectacular, but perhaps more effective. First, ‘leadership’ is a shared responsibility — occurring at all levels and deeply embedded in the way the institution works as an organization on a day-to-day basis. Second, the particular presidential qualities needed to build and sustain the culture and organizational processes observed at study campuses are more about listening than talking, and more about consistent personal modeling of a particular collective vision than about spectacular public performances.”

The teams that visited the 12 campuses reported while all the presidents, through their words and actions, set a tone that made clear that the academic success of students was paramount, **the most important thing they did was decentralizing power so that staff and faculty members throughout the institutions took responsibility.** That approach encourages “the kind of risk-taking and assumption of responsibility” that produces strong results, the report says.

“It’s all about people and fostering an open-communication environment, creating community on campus, and hiring those who share an awareness of the mission.” the report quotes Montclair State University’s president, Susan Cole, as saying. “We decide very clearly and without ambiguity from the center out what needs to be done, but then give lots of freedom to act. We encourage work across boundaries and out of silos. You have the

freedom to do the work, but you will be held accountable.”

In offering advice to presidents and other officials who seek to improve the retention of students on their campuses, the report focuses not on instituting “best practice” programs but on a series of practical, but perhaps more difficult, steps that institutions might take.

The report suggests that the president start a conversation on the campus about retention and student success, perhaps by providing graduation rate data showing how the college compares with peer institutions, and follow it up with by taking stock – through data analysis, interviews and other means – to figure out whether the institution measures up, and if not, why.

Depending on the answers, the institution must act strategically, avoiding the quick and dirty implementation of new programs in favor of longer term approaches – like altering the process of recruiting faculty and staff members to ensure that furthering the goal of student success is a factor in searches – that may be harder to achieve but ultimately more important.

The report concludes: “There is no one “magic bullet” that guarantees success. Simply finding what appears to be a “best practice” combination of programming and “plugging it in” on campus is unlikely to be sufficient. Success instead means carefully reading the current campus culture, aligning people and programs, and making a collective commitment to be in it for the long haul. And sound presidential leadership is where all of this begins.”

— [Doug Lederman](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
<http://insidehighered.com/news/2005/09/27/retain>.*

© Copyright 2008 *Inside Higher Ed*