

Student Success In College: Creating Conditions That Matter

A Book Review

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For Submission to the NASPA Region IV-West Newsletter

One of the important challenges that colleges and universities face is on-going assessment. Higher education prides itself on being high-performing and productive. One survey tool that is used at 850 different four-year colleges and universities is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The NSSE survey instrument is a research-based tool for gathering information that focuses on learning-centered indicators of quality in undergraduate education. The report is helpful in many ways such as identifying institutional improvements, benchmarking and public accountability. NSSE asks undergraduate students about their college experiences such as how they spend their time, their interaction with faculty and what they have gained from their classes. Research shows that exceptional experiences in the classroom along with strong interactions between students, peers and faculty result in high-quality student outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

In the fall of 2002, A NSSE Institute research team launched an intensive effort called Project D.E.E.P. (Documenting Effective Educational Practice). The project was a two-year study of twenty high-performing colleges and universities based on NSSE data. Institutions that participated in the project were ones that had higher than predicted graduation rates and higher than predicted scores on the five NSSE areas of effective educational practice: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student interaction with faculty members, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environments.

Results of this project have been compiled and produced in *Student Success In College: Creating Conditions That Matter* by George Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, John Schuh, Elizabeth Whitt and Associates. The success stories shared in this book are impressive. It would be helpful to pose the following two questions before I address the contents of the book:

- *What do high-performing colleges and universities do to promote success?*
- *What campus features – policies, programs, and practices-contribute to high levels of engagement and better-than-predicted graduation rates?*

We know that the following institutional conditions are important for student development:

A clear and focused institutional mission
 High Standards for student performance
 Support for students to explore human differences and emerging dimensions of self
 Emphasis on the early months and first year of study
 Respect for diverse talents
 Integration of prior learning and experience
 Ongoing practice of learned skills
 Active learning
 Assessment and feedback
 Collaboration among students

Adequate time on task

Out-of-class contact with faculty (Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, (1984), Chickering & Gamson, (1987), and Education Commission of the States, (1995).

The twenty institutions studied represent the broad array of baccalaureate granting colleges and universities. Nine were private and eleven were public. The institutions studied are:

Alverno College	Cal State-Monterey Bay	Gonzaga University
Evergreen State College	Fayetteville State University	George Mason
Longwood University	Macalester College	Miami University
Sweet Briar College	U. Of Kansas	Ursinus College
U of Maine, Farmington	U. of Michigan	Wabash College
Texas at El Paso	The University of the South	Wofford College
Wheaton College	Winston-Salem State University	

The authors make clear that there is no one blueprint for success but that there are six factors and conditions which are common at all of the twenty institutions listed above. The factors that make these institutions educationally effective are:

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

There is diversity in the colleges that were studied. There are two all-female colleges, one all-male, two historically black institutions, two primarily Hispanic universities and several that are private with a competitive enrollment process. There are also colleges that have open enrollment.

There are many examples discussed throughout the book that make each college successful. Many of the programs highlighted include; intensive first-year experiences, learning communities, highly engaged faculty, strong collaborations between academic affairs and student affairs divisions, effective and charismatic presidents, meaningful community-campus relationships and passion for learning and assessment. I should point out that there are many colleges and universities that do or say they do all of the items I just listed. What makes the institutions in Project D.E.E.P. different is that they implement all of these qualities in everyday life on campus. There is a strong emphasis placed on writing, small and engaging classroom sizes and tenured or full-time faculty teaching undergraduate courses, not graduate assistants. D.E.E.P. institutions implement technology, the faculty engages students outside of the classroom in many ways and the message of quality is sent and resounds throughout the campus from the president, key

administrators, faculty, students and community members. Excellence is a standard in all of the DEEP institutions.

What is most compelling as one reads this book is the constant theme of mission clarity and it being fundamental in every way of life on campus. For example, Project D.E.E.P. Institutions know that they expect high standards from both student and faculty. They make no bones about excellence and the hard work it requires. That mission of excellence is woven into everyday life on campus. You can find it in the classroom, in extra-curriculars and in the many campus and community programs established. At one D.E.E.P. institution it is firmly held that “failure is not an option.” The institution I just mentioned is one that serves a significant percentage of its student population that is first generation and low-income background. Such a belief system is bold. There is a strong commitment for excellence throughout campus at Project D.E.E.P. institutions.

Project D.E.E.P. institutions celebrate diversity and they encourage spirited debate and dialogue on campus. There is a strong component in residential life at campuses that have a significant residential student population. A few of the unique characteristics that I thought articulated the significant differences between Project D.E.E.P. institutions as compared to others in the United States:

- Wabash College, an all-male institution in Indiana has one rule for their student code of conduct. Their students are expected to conduct themselves as “gentlemen” at all times. The campus determines what that means, but it is based on a tradition of self-governance and high community standards enforced by all members of the community.
- The Evergreen State College in Washington State does not issue letter grades. Faculty will either pass or fail a student, but students get in writing a thorough assessment of his/her work. Likewise the students evaluate in well-detailed reports, written evaluations of their faculty. Together they discuss the academic work.
- The University of Kansas requires all of its key administrators to teach at least one class per year. This insures the appreciation for learning, promotes student contact, and keeps administrators in touch with campus life.
- The University of Michigan encourages tenured faculty to teach undergraduate courses and rewards them accordingly. The university has committed millions to undergraduate education, development and success with the construction of a new learning center for only undergraduates.
- Fayetteville State University adopts the belief that you must meet all students “where they are,” and not where you want or wish they were. Tailoring classes to meet the unique needs of students is a fundamental concept in how academic coursework is delivered.

This is an excellent read. I had the good fortune to watch the authors present their work at the national NASPA convention in Tampa, Florida in March, 2005. The one

constant theme at the conference presentation was the need to identify all potential “learning intersections” on your campus. Leave no stone of learning opportunity unturned. And finally, as student affairs administrators, the future will demand that we create intersections for learning with our students and especially the faculty. Gone are the days of being an island on our campuses. Student affairs must philosophically shift to a more developmental model. Traditional student services are absolutely necessary, but our profession must continue to explore the ways to integrate the learning and classroom activities in all we do. That is the future of student affairs.

One of the glaring weaknesses of the work of Project D.E.E.P. is that the study does not cover the work of the community colleges. It would be interesting to see if any of the twenty models could work in the two-year setting. My hunch is that indeed the applications are the same. A passion for teaching, caring about our students, and creating an environment that the entire campus embraces are concepts easily transferable and just as necessary for the two-year institutions.

Finally, I shared a bus ride from the national NASPA conference site to the hotel with one of the team members of Project D.E.E.P. that visited and assessed the twenty institutions included in the study. Dr. Charles Schroeder, former Vice President for Student Affairs at the University of Missouri-Columbia and currently doing consulting work with Noel-Levitz, shared with me his belief that student affairs is always in a constant state of change, but that the important emphasis placed on learning should never change or waver. Dr. Schroeder believes institutions that strongly articulate the importance of learning, must indeed practice and incorporate it in every possible way on campus.

This is an exceptional book to refer to when one considers student persistence, excellence, academic success, and student development. I really enjoyed reading it and found the information to be very useful. A good investment for the professional library!

References

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