GETTING IT DONE

By Timothy Pratt
How Colleges and Universities Are Successfully Boosting Attainment Rates

If you were an athlete and your coach asked you right before an important game, “Do you think you can win?” and your answer was no, you might just find yourself on the bench.

But when it comes to helping students graduate, Bellevue University (NE) is choosing the opposite tack. Since last year, the private, nonprofit university eight miles south of Omaha is asking admitted students prior to enrollment if they think they can get a degree. Then, instead of turning away those who say no, Bellevue ensures that this group of students receives more hands-on coaching from advisors in planning their paths toward graduation.

It is one among dozens of innovations being launched across the nation as institutions big and small, public and private, attempt to crack the code for retaining and graduating more students. The issue has become a priority for college and university presidents as economic, social, and political signs all point to the importance of raising the number of students who complete degrees in a timely fashion.

“There's essentially a push at the state and the national levels,” said Deborah M. Seymour, assistant vice president at the Center for Education Attainment and Innovation of the American Council on Education (ACE).

“The society and economy are seeking higher-level skills for economic success, while governors and legislatures that are giving money to schools are asking, ‘Why are students not completing?’” added Louis Soares, vice president for policy research and strategy at ACE.

Nonprofit organizations such as Lumina Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have been helping raise college completion rates for years, but the effort took on an extra dimension in 2009 when President Obama announced the goal of leading the world in the percentage of adults with a degree by 2020. This first-place position now looks unlikely. But the range of initiatives being attempted is worthy of attention as higher education leaders evaluate which approaches are showing the most promise in helping boost the nation's attainment rate.

Life Coaching

At Bellevue, the question of whether a prospective student believes he or she will get a degree is one of 45 in a newly launched survey. The idea, said Mary B. Hawkins, Bellevue's president, is to measure what she called the student's mind-set—the noncognitive aspects of his or her life as he or she prepares to start a college education. But the answers are not enough: Bellevue has changed its advising from purely academic—what courses might be needed for each major, for example—to “life coaching.”

“We found that the non-academic part [of a student's life] is more important” in predicting future success, Hawkins said. Though only a year old, the approach is yielding early signs of success: Term-to-term persistence rates have gone from 91 to 94 percent.

When President Obama laid out the ambitious goal of the United States becoming a global leader in higher education, he drew particular attention to community colleges, the expected source of 5 million of the estimated 8 million associate and bachelor's degrees needed to reach number one by 2020.

But community colleges face some of the stiffest challenges in raising graduation rates, as up to 70 percent of entering freshmen need remedial coursework, and only about 15 percent of those students obtain degrees at two-year institutions within three years.
At The City University of New York (CUNY), a program called Accelerated Study in Associated Programs (ASAP) has produced positive results in its seven community colleges by including providing free MetroCards and textbooks, committing students to full-time study, and offering wrap-around services such as twice-monthly advising.

An independent review showed that students with remedial needs who were enrolled in the program achieved a three-year graduation rate of 40 percent, nearly twice that of a similar group of students who were not in the program. A separate review showed that students without remedial needs who enrolled in the program graduated at more than double the rate of such students outside the program.

Apart from the free textbooks and transportation

"It's not just, 'What classes do you need?' It's also helping set goals, and teaching self-advocacy skills."

—John Mogulescu, CUNY

and the flexible scheduling, which allows working students to attend full time, a key to the program’s success has been the advising, said John Mogulescu, founding dean of the CUNY School of Professional Studies and the senior university dean for academic affairs. "It's not just, "What classes do you need?" It's also helping set goals, and teaching self-advocacy skills," he said.

CUNY's strategy meshes with many of the goals and practices promoted by advocates on the issue, including Lumina Foundation, which is in its sixth year of Goal 2025, a project aimed at having 60 percent of Americans obtain degrees or certificates by the year 2025. "The major factor in determining if an individual who is born poor will stay poor is . . . success in postsecondary education," said Dewayne Matthews, vice president of strategy development at the foundation.

As for the many initiatives aimed at increasing completion rates across the nation, Matthews said the most promising ones have these assets in common: "greater structure, more proactive advising, and campus-based data on student outcomes."

**Leveraging Technology**

At Valencia College in Orlando, Florida, President Sanford C. (Sandy) Shugart is about to enter the second year of the New Student Experience, which includes a required course that has the aim of helping students develop the life skills needed to complete a degree and plan for the future. After finishing the required course, students develop an advisory relationship with a faculty member linked to their majors. At the same time, Shugart's college has partnered with a technology company to create software that will help faculty and advisors guide students in their choices about courses and other issues.

One of Valencia's principal challenges moving forward may come from the level of the students entering the college, in a state where two out of three students access higher education through community colleges. Only a third of incoming students are college-ready, according to Shugart; nearly one in five require what he called "deep remediation." This is why Valencia also offers "lots of instructional support," including tutoring, online learning, and comprehensive learning labs. Although initial student surveys appear to show a high level of satisfaction and increased engagement resulting from the New Student Experience program, "It's too early to declare victory," he said.

Such strategic use of technology is vital, said Molly Corbett Broad, president of ACE—especially in helping nontraditional students accelerate their journey along less conventional pathways toward a degree. "Here is where embracing the role of infor-
mation technology to assist in these new pathways... is the most likely path for us to make changes in the attainment rate at a faster pace," Broad said. "I do think we are headed in the right direction, but not fast enough."

**Intensive Advising**

At the University of California, Riverside (UC Riverside), where about 60 percent of students are the first in their families to attend college, and about the same proportion receive Pell Grants, Chancellor Kim A. Wilcox is attempting to improve on the campus's 42 percent four-year graduation rate.

Wilcox's efforts include joining the University Innovation Alliance, a year-old initiative involving 11 public research universities committed to producing 68,000 additional college graduates and a total of 860,000 graduates by 2025. He has partnered with the school district in Riverside County, encouraging high school students to fill out the FAFSA and to apply for admission to at least two colleges or universities. And UC Riverside has begun using the same combination of data analytics and intensive counseling seen at other institutions. For example, a student might once have spent valuable time with an advisor talking about schedules. Now, the same student can use a computer program to help set schedules, and instead address more substantive issues with the advisor.

"The whole notion of advising changes," Wilcox said. Although most of these efforts are relatively new, he said he is most proud of reaching a point where low-income students graduate at the same rate as other students.

Gathering data from student transcripts and using them to better inform "intensive advising" helped raise graduation rates for freshmen Pell Grant recipients at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire from 49 percent in 2005 to 60 percent in 2010, according to Chancellor James C. Schmidt. As part of that effort, a group of 60 faculty members concluded that about half the transcripts they analyzed showed students who were off-track for graduating in four years, according to a 2014 study on retention and completion by The Education Trust. These data directly informed the campus's advising practices, and Schmidt is also pursuing a new idea for motivating students to graduate in four years: a 25 percent discount on continuing education courses.

**Whatever It Takes**

Portland State University (OR) used crowdsourcing in 2012 to solicit proposals from faculty and staff for increasing retention and completion rates, received 160, and allocated $3 million to the 24 winning ideas. These proposals, which have taken several years to be implemented, ranged from the simple (moving the process of changing majors online, freeing up advisory time) to the complex (granting credentials for prior learning). The university has also launched eight "flexible degree programs," aimed at the 1 million adults in Oregon who have earned some college credits, but lack a degree. Another program addresses the opposite situation, using data analytics to identify students who are on track to acquire unnecessary or excess credits.

"As an institution, we shouldn't be a barrier to timely completion—whatever that means to the student," said Sona Karentz Andrews, provost and vice president for academic affairs at Portland State. "We want to focus on the pace that works for them, given where they're at."

Portland State has also mirrored other institutions nationwide in attempting to produce more graduates by forging closer relationships with area community colleges. The university works with Portland Community College (OR) and Mt. Hood Community College (OR) to allow students to maintain dual enrollment, obtain associate degrees.
as they work toward bachelor's degrees, or earn degrees with courses from both the community college and the university.

Valencia College has developed a similar relationship with the University of Central Florida, resulting in an increase of 97 percent in associate degrees awarded from 2008 to 2011.

"Institutions are struggling to do the right thing, but without the adequate financial and policy resources they need to succeed."

—Barmak Nassirian, AASCU

CUNY ASAP has also just entered into an agreement with the John Jay College of Criminal Justice (NY), a CUNY institution, that will offer students in the ASAP program a direct line to bachelor's degrees.

Facing Up to Challenges

Beyond the challenges these and the dozens of other initiatives across the nation face in actually increasing the number of students with degrees, key questions about cost must be answered.

"Institutions are struggling to do the right thing, but without the adequate financial and policy resources they need to succeed," said Barmak Nassirian, director of federal relations and policy analysis at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). Nassirian also wonders whether pressures to produce more graduates might push some institutions to enroll more students who need less remedial help, and are more likely to succeed. "I'm worried that schools will engage in risk-avoidance, and take the path of least resistance," he said.

Leaders at these institutions seem to believe the math will work. At Bellevue, for example, President Hawkins points out that an increase in retention—12,000 credit hours during the first semester of recent innovations—will compensate for the costs.

YOUR MISSION | OUR SOLUTIONS

What is your institution doing to ensure your students graduate?

By partnering with Huron, your institution will be positioned to provide students with the tools they need to succeed.
of those innovations. Portland State Chancellor Andrews agrees: “It costs the university when students drop out,” Andrews said. “If you increase retention, you increase income.”

Of course many institutions continue to face reductions in state and other sources of financial support. At the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Chancellor Schmidt is looking at a cut of $9 million in the next year, dropping his budget to $84 million. His response has been to cut administrative staff by 25 percent while leaving faculty alone. He is also confident that he can attract more students to his university, and next fall’s incoming class will be 2,300, up several hundred from the year before.

At Valencia, President Shugart said he is also committed to making sure that “every penny contributes to learning.” Although recent reforms will cost up to 3 percent of his university’s $170 million budget, he is confident that these costs will be offset by creating partnerships and seeking revenue from such sources as international student tuition, lease agreements for cell phone towers on campus, and corporate training held on campus.

At CUNY, the ASAP program costs $3,800 more per student per year. In the coming year, increasing the program from 4,300 to 13,000 students should drop the cost to $3,300. Still, “what we have found,” said Mogulescu, “is that because the results are so extraordinary, the city of New York has upped the budget.” Cost analyses have shown that the overall increase in graduates means it now actually costs less per student to complete a degree.

And when considered together with such factors as the increased tax revenue and decreased dependence on public assistance that come with graduates entering the workforce, such programs are “well worth supporting,” he said: “We figure it would be wise for governments to take a look at this.”

**Did you know:** Many institutions feel their course offerings should translate to their student’s success — yet many report not have a clear plan to do so?

To achieve outcomes that matter most, Huron will help you:
- Develop, design and implement problem-based curricular strategies
- Improve work readiness through experiential learning
- Turn career services into a strategic business partner
- Integrate and extend existing student advising services

Download case studies, tips, and resources for student success at: huronconsultinggroup.com/studentsuccess

1-866-229-8700
huronconsultinggroup.com/education

© 2015 Huron Consulting Group Inc. All Rights Reserved.