

Student Success: Creating Conditions That Matter

We can create conditions that matter to student learning and success.

That was the message delivered to OSU faculty and staff on University Day by keynote speaker, Dr. Elizabeth Whitt, Professor, Division of Counseling, Rehabilitation, and Student Development, from the University of Iowa.

Two years ago, Dr. Whitt and 23 other researchers began to investigate 20 colleges and universities across the country that had better than expected graduation rates and better than expected scores on the National Survey of Student Engagement. So what were these schools doing that

gave them better than expected results on these two measures of student success?

First, "better than expected" meant that given various input measures like their institutional type, admissions requirements, types of students, etc. these schools were doing better than what would be statistically expected for them to do on the two measures.

Second, these schools varied considerably on the various input measures—from very selective schools to open admission to large research to small liberal arts.

The guiding questions for this

research included:

- What do "high performing" colleges and universities do to promote student success?
- What campus features—policies, programs, and practices—are related to higher-than-predicted graduation rates and student engagement in educationally purposeful activities?

As these researchers hypothesized, there were specific patterns of behavior that these 20 institutions shared and that made a difference in the success of their students.

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What OSU First Year Students Say About Their First Few Months of Residential Experience

Generally speaking most students who live in OSU residence halls are first year students. Only about 29% are sophomores, juniors, seniors, or graduate students. In order to learn more about residential students, the University Housing and Dining Services (UHDS) participated in a national benchmarking effort sponsored by the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I)/Educational Benchmarking (EBI). The following information is taken from the results of this *Resident Survey* and per-

tains to the students-in-general residing in OSU residence halls unless otherwise noted. Some of the information also refers to a comparison of OSU's results with a "Select 6" comparison group that includes Colorado State University, Kansas State University, Michigan State University, North Carolina State University, University of Oregon, and Washington State University. OSU's results were also compared to the 66 other Doctoral Research Extensive universities who participated in the study.

OSU had a 31% return rate compared to a 53% return rate for all Carnegie Research Extensive universities. For the "Select 6" institutions, the return rate ranged from 28% to 70%.

Respondent Demographic Data

- 60% female, 40% male
- 78% white American, 19% domestic students of color, 3% non U.S./ permanent resident
- 75% had lived in a resi-

dence hall for less than three terms

- 86% reported living in a coed residence hall
- 42% reported they had not chosen their current roommate even though students could use the Roommate Matching Network to select a roommate.

Areas that Students Rated Highly

Most areas reflected in the

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What OSU First Year Students Say

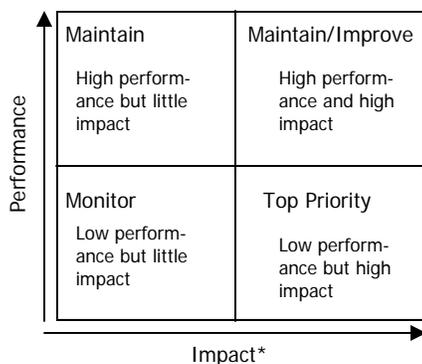
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survey questions were rated highly by students. The survey items were further analyzed and divided into 15 factors:

1. RA or Advisor
2. Information Provided by the RA
3. Opportunities to Participate in Hall
4. Interactions with Others in the Hall*
5. Ability to Manage Time and Solve Problems*
6. Understand Self and Develop Leadership Skills
7. Fellow Residents
8. Roommate(s)*
9. Personal Space or Room in Hall*
10. Floor or Hall Facilities*
11. Residence Hall Services*
12. Room Assignment or Change Process*
13. Safety and Security*
14. Dining Services*
15. Overall Program Effectiveness.

These factors were then plotted on a priority matrix. This matrix allowed UHDS to determine which factors were most influential in predicting overall satisfaction with overall program effective-

Priority Matrix



*Factors that are predictors of overall effectiveness

ness. Only 9 of the 14 factors were found to be predictors of overall program effectiveness (e.g., *factors in previous column). Additionally, all of the factors, at a minimum, were rated "good" by students.

Students rated UHDS as performing excellently with regard to interaction with others in the hall, residence hall services, safety and security, roommate(s), RA or Advisor, Information provided by RA. This is quite positive even though some of these factors are low predictors for overall student satisfaction.

Even in the high impact areas, UHDS performance is rated as "good" in areas that included: personal space, room assignment or change process, and dining services. These areas are listed as the top priority for attention and further investigation as UHDS uses student feedback to improve the living/learning environment of residence halls.

How the Data Has Been Useful to UHDS

UHDS is committed to continual improvement and as a result of their findings, has begun to:

1. Review roommate assignment process to determine how students would like for it to be better for them.
2. Continue training of in-hall staff to help them manage residence hall noise issues more effectively.
3. Review dining options and hours of operation to increase performance in these areas.
4. Develop focus groups with domestic students of color and international students to gain a deeper understanding of their responses on the survey in order to improve services to these populations.

For further information about this survey and the results, contact Eric Hansen, UHDS, at eric.hansen@oregonstate.edu.

Student Borrowing and Debt Burden

In a recent study by the National Center for Education Statistics, researchers examined the impact of increased college tuition and increased loan limits on federal Stafford loans on the borrowing patterns and debt burden of recent college graduates. The study compared cohorts of students from 1992-1993 and from 1999-2000.

Between 1992-1993 and 1999-2000 the federal loan volume grew 137% (in constant 2002 dollars). While dependent students in the lowest income group increased borrowing from 67% to 72%, increases for the students in the highest income group nearly doubled from 24% to 46%. Undergraduate students who had borrowed \$25,000 or more for school increased from 7% to 26% from 1992-1993 to 1999-2000.

Despite the median debt burden (". . . monthly loan payments as a percentage of monthly salary income a year after graduation") has remained about the same for both groups. Higher salaries and lower interest rates appear to be mediators in terms of debt burden between the two cohorts.

Yet upon further examination, the impact of the current borrowing patterns and subsequent debt burden for students is significant. Although there is not a standard for acceptable student loan debt burden, mortgage lenders usually recommend that it be around 8% of pre-tax dollars.

Amount of money borrowed, interest rates, and after graduation incomes all effect the debt burden of students. Interest rates on federal loans are variable and employment circumstances can change over the course of the loan repayment period. Thus, both of these factors can significantly alter debt burden and thus buying power over the course of the typical ten-year loan repayment period.

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Student Success: Creating Conditions That Matter

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The six conditions that the 20 high performing institutions shared included:

1. **A living mission and a lived educational philosophy:** Schools had a clear and widely understood mission and policies and procedures tailored to that mission.
2. **An unshakeable focus on student learning:** The idea of working with the students they have versus focusing only on the best and the brightest permeated the institutions. A great deal of time was made for students and reward structures were geared to good pedagogical strategies. Consider that anything worth doing is worth requiring.
3. **Environments adapted for educational enrichment:** Connections to the community, "human scale" structures and a psychological size that fosters engagement between peers, faculty and staff.
4. **Clearly marked pathways to student success:** Students are intentionally brought into the culture of the institution and are provided with clear maps that lead to success. This means that there are mutually reinforcing student expectations, institutional expectations, and institutional rewards that are aligned across the campus. It begins with the first contact a potential student has with the institution.
5. **Improvement-oriented ethos:** Schools consistently demonstrated a positive restlessness and commitment to being their best. They know who they are and they hold themselves to higher standards. Decisions were informed by data and they invested in student success. These schools prided themselves on wanting to be better.
6. **Shared responsibility for educational quality.** At these schools, everyone was an educator and understood that to be part of their role at the institution. Student and academic affairs collaborated in ways that crossed and

blurred boundaries. Students knew they mattered and they played a role in determining and sustaining institutional priorities.

Based upon this research Dr. Whitt made several recommendations regarding steps that institutions can take to improve the success of their students. These included:

1. **First and foremost, focus everyone's attention on the educational mission.** Create a clear shared vision of what and whom the institution serves. Create comprehensive, mutually reinforcing programs, policies, and practices to support that vision.
2. **Lay out the path to student success.** Emphasize student initiative and focus on the under engaged students. If something works, consider requiring it.
3. **Attract, socialize, and reward people who "get it."** Pick institutional leaders who are right for the times, recruit faculty and staff committed to student learning, and emphasize student centeredness in faculty and staff orientation.
4. **Promote and reward collaboration**—across functional lines and between campus and community including tightening the philosophical linkages between academic and student affairs.
5. **Put money where it will make a difference in student engagement.** This includes investing in teaching and learning; adopting a budgeting system that focuses on student learning processes and outcomes; aligning the reward system with the institutional mission; values and priorities and investing in faculty and staff who are doing the right things.
6. **Do more of what you know works for student success; do less of**

what doesn't. Yes, engage in research on the outcomes of activities and rethink resource investments based on data. This likely will include reviewing and revising time commitments and priorities.

For more information on Student Success: Creating Conditions That Matter, refer to the following web site:

<http://webdb.iu.edu/Nsse/?view=deep/briefs>

Or refer to the following book:

Kuh, G.D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J.H., Whitt, E. J. (2005). *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Thanks to Dr. Elizabeth Whitt for sharing her powerpoint presentation so that the content of the article truly reflects her thoughts and remarks.

Student Borrowing and Debt Burden

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Additionally, it is important to note that while the median debt burden has remained fairly constant cohort to cohort, the amount of money students have borrowed for college has increased substantially. While loans have made college accessible for more students, it also requires that they money must be repaid. Student loans delay payment of the bill, but do not decrease the total price of attending college. In fact, the cost to the student actually increases when loan interest is factored in. Heavier reliance on loans for providing access to higher education has a long lasting effect on the student's buying power in the future, and consequently impacts the economy years after graduation.

(Choy, S.P. & Carroll, C. D. (2005). Debt burden: A comparison of 1992-93 and 1999-2000 bachelor's degree recipients a year after graduating. National Center for Education Statistics: U.S. Department of Education.)

perspective

Understanding the 'Facts' & 'Figures'
about our students and their learning

Thoughts on First Year Student Retention

There is a great deal of research on college student retention and many theories about how best to retain and graduate students. Much of the research suggests that the out-of-class experiences of students are key to their retention. Yet, we also know that without classroom experiences no one will be retained or graduated. In fact, depending on who you happen to talk with on campus, one of two answers to the question of how to retain students usually occurs. One has



to do with classes and the other has to do with out-of-class experiences. Yet in both responses, the key element that most affects student retention and graduation is often omitted. Alexander Astin, Vincent Tinto, George Kuh, and many other scholars and practitioners suggest that student learning, regardless of venue (classroom or out-of-class), is the basis for student retention and graduation. Their research and logic makes two key points:

1. Students who learn are students who stay, and
2. Students are much more likely to learn and thus, to persist, if they find support for learning, are given frequent and timely feedback about their learning, and are actively engaged in learning (especially with others).

As faculty is up to us to determine how best to facilitate student learning regardless of the particular venue—in class or out-of-class activities. In essence, how can we as faculty implement student learning experiences that cross the boundaries between in-class and out-of-

class experiences. Bridging these boundaries directed toward student learning entails calling upon the strengths of faculty who primarily interact with students in classroom situations and faculty who primarily work with students outside of the classroom. This likely will necessitate some changes for both groups of faculty. The out-of-class faculty may need to think more in terms of student learning rather than student involvement and the in-class group may need to think more about expanding the environment for learning.

Gahagan and Luna (2005) propose designing learning experiences for probability. In other words:

- What do you intentionally want your students to spend time doing? (e.g., increasing the probability of getting students' attention.)
- How can you increase the probabilities that they do just that? (e.g., increasing the probability of getting students' time.)

Few would question that students have many demands for their attention as well as their time—even for students who have entered OSU with a very serious commitment to college and to graduating.

So, what can we do?

- Enter into conversations about student learning that crosses the academic/student affairs boundaries.
- Design educational experiences with student learning first, using the most up-to-date strategies and pedagogies that keep the learner at the fore.
- Increase the use of what we know about the positive influence on learning for students involved in living/learning environments in residence halls (e.g., faculty in residence programs, learning communities, academically themed floors or houses, residential colleges, faculty-student affairs partnerships).
- Keep tutoring and other academic support services available in residence halls and close to the traffic paths of students.

- Engage faculty in the design of learning environments in residence halls, classrooms, and other building renovations.
- Set high expectations for students and provide early and frequent feedback to students about their learning.
- Design experiences that promote student-to-student interactions related to their academic work—a good place to bridge between academic and student affairs faculty.
- Create the kind of learning environment that we want for ourselves and our students.

"We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference."
John Dewey, 1924

OSU Perspective:

What is it?

The **OSU Perspective** was developed to provide assessment and other information about our students and programs. We hope that by making this information available to OSU faculty and staff, we can stimulate conversation that helps keep students and student learning at our core.

The **Perspective** is published quarterly both in print and on the web: http://oregonstate.edu/student_affairs/research/perspective.html

Ideas and suggestions for subsequent **OSU Perspective** publications are welcomed.

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