Never Let It Rest

Lessons about Student Success from High-Performing Colleges and Universities

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We're back at Macalester College for our second site visit. This meeting is with the provost to get feedback about the interim report we sent a few weeks ago. We're ready to record what he says we missed about what the college does to enhance student success. Instead, he pulls out a pen and legal pad and says, "This was a fine report. Now tell us how we can do things better here at Mac."

There's a lot of buzz these days about student success and educational effectiveness. College costs are rising and enrollments are at an all-time high, yet the proportion of students earning degrees has stayed more or less constant for decades. This leads some to conclude that colleges aren't holding up their end of the educational bargain.

The question, *Do they graduate?* is receiving the most scrutiny by state legislatures and by those drafting the reauthorization legislation for the Higher Education Act. But policymakers, parents, and students are also asking tough questions about what they can reasonably expect from colleges and universities while students are enrolled. Are schools allocating

resources in ways that enhance student learning? Are students challenged and supported in their studies? Do they acquire the lifelong learning skills and competencies that will enable them to lead productive, civically responsible lives after college?

A time-honored approach to improving effectiveness is to learn what high-performing organizations within a given industry do and then to determine which of their practices are replicable in other settings. A team of 24 researchers coordinated by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) Institute for Effective Educational Practice at the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research set out to do just that.

The Documenting Effective Educational Practices (DEEP) project was a two-year study of 20 four-year colleges and universities that had both higher-than-predicted graduation rates and higher-than-predicted scores on the NSSE. Graduation is increasingly used in accountability and performance systems as an indicator of institutional effectiveness, and student engagement is important because research shows that it's linked to a host of desirable outcomes of college.

The schools listed in the box on page 48 are not necessarily the "most engaging" institutions in the country, nor do they necessarily have the highest graduation rates. But they exceed what they are expected to do in these two key areas, after taking into account relevant student and institutional characteristics. Taken together, these two indicators suggest that these colleges and universities "add value" to their students' experiences.

The DEEP research team visited each institution twice for several days. Altogether, we talked with more than 2,700 people; observed dozens of classes; and spent time in libraries,

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cafeterias, and other campus venues. We also reviewed hundreds of print and electronic documents. From this mountain of data, we distilled a handful of common themes that cut across these very different colleges and universities. These are described in our new book, *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*.

One of the most important conditions characterizing the DEEP institutions is an intentional focus on institutional improvement. In this article we illustrate what this improvement-oriented ethos looks like in practice and conclude with some ideas for what other institutions can learn from DEEP.

AN IMPROVEMENT-ORIENTED ETHOS

The Macalester College provost's response to our description of his institution illustrates several key features of the DEEP schools. They constantly experiment with new approaches for improving teaching and learning, occasionally adopting promising practices from other institutions. Confident as to who and what they are, their motivation for getting "better" generally is internal. And they continuously monitor what they're doing, where they are, and where they want to go, in order to maintain momentum. Although generally self-critical, they aren't plagued by a culture of complaint, in large part because of their bent toward innovation. To varying degrees, they're emblematic of the learning organizations described by Peter Senge and the firms studied by Jim Collins that catapulted from good to great.

Supporting this orientation toward improvement is a "can-do" ethic that permeates the campuses—a tapestry of values and beliefs that reflect the institutions' willingness to take on matters of substance consistent with their priorities. Indeed, they exude a sense of "positive restlessness" in how they think about themselves and what they aspire to be.

Positive restlessness. Never quite satisfied with their performance, DEEP colleges and universities are restless in a positive way. A faculty member at Evergreen State College explained what this feeling is like on that campus. "We talk about what needs to be fixed all the time. This is very much a part of our culture." Indeed, much of Evergreen's academic

PROJECT DEEP COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Alverno College (WI)
California State University at Monterey Bay (CA)
The Evergreen State College (WA)
Fayetteville State University (NC)
George Mason University (VA)
Gonzaga University (WA)
Longwood University (VA)
Macalester College (MN)
Miami University (OH)
Sewanee: University of the South (TN)
Sweet Briar College (VA)
University of Kansas (KS)
University of Maine at Farmington (ME)
University of Michigan (MI)
University of Texas at El Paso (TX)
Ursinus College (PA)
Wabash College (IN)
Wheaton College (MA)
Winston-Salem State University (NC)
Wofford College (SC)

program is reinvented on an annual basis. Anchoring its curriculum is the "Program," an interdisciplinary semester- or year-long study of a topic or problem that a small group of faculty from different disciplines design and pursue with two dozen or so interested students. Faculty who teach similar material or the institution's core courses follow the basic approach of the Program by frequently revising both the content and pedagogy of their courses as well.

Improving the quality of learning and teaching is pretty much the order of the day at DEEP schools. As a sociology faculty member involved in the Teaching and Learning Center at Fayetteville State University in North Carolina told us, "We are very conscious of the need to understand students and to engage them actively in the classroom." Another faculty member explained that it's part of the institutional culture here "to address poor teaching."

Faculty Learning Communities at Miami University provide a venue for

faculty members to discuss ways to extend their pedagogical repertoires. Each participant identifies a specific course that he or she wants to improve, discusses ways to make improvements, and implements changes during the academic year. Theme-based learning communities focus on such issues as cooperative learning and ethics across the curriculum, using team teaching and small-group strategies to enhance learning. Other groups experiment with problem-based learning and teaching portfolios, along with strategies for assessing student learning.

From its founding in 1994, California State University at Monterey Bay set out to be an innovative, learner-centered educational institution. Today, the university integrates interdisciplinary academic programs, active and collaborative learning, and service learning throughout its curriculum. According to one administrator, "We are our biggest critics.... We hold ourselves to a higher standard because we're supposed to be

trying new things.”

George Mason University’s (GMU) similar inclination to innovate is due in part to its relative youth and its self-perception as an “underdog” in the Virginia higher education system. As one staff member told us, “Because this is a young institution, there’s a strong dynamic sense, an openness to try new things and do interesting things.” Another said, “What’s so great is there’s no predefined way of doing things, of how this place moves—except forward.” A student voiced a similar sentiment: “We’re big on improvement here, and this place is so responsive. You can make things happen very fast.” A faculty member added, “The attitude is, ‘Let’s do it and see what happens.’”

Investing in student success.

Discretionary resources exist at the University of Michigan to seed innovation. The provost supports initiatives to improve undergraduate education, and academic units sponsor scores of small programs that significantly enrich the undergraduate experience. Among these are the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program and a number of highly visible diversity initiatives, such as the Pathways to Student Success and Excellence Program, the Minority Engineering Program, and the King/Chavez/Parks College Clubs.

Even DEEP schools with modest resources are committed to support good ideas that promise to enhance student learning. For example, although resources at Gonzaga University are limited, one senior administrator asserted, “We have a can-do attitude.... We figure out how to get things done.” Students are part of the solution, as one administrator pointed out: “We need to employ students to operate.”

Campus work experiences are often educationally enriching as well as a source of income, providing students with substantive leadership and learning opportunities. Another positive side effect of hiring large numbers of stu-

dents for campus jobs is a strong sense of student ownership of university programs and services.

Although resources at the University of Maine at Farmington (UMF) are stretched thin, its financial challenges seem to strengthen, not threaten, its sense of purpose. A senior administrator told us, “We do a lot with a little,

but where you put your money speaks volumes.” Like Gonzaga, its Student Work Initiative employs students on campus in jobs essential to keeping the campus functioning. Jump-started with \$80,000 from the president’s office, the program ensures that more than half of UMF students work on campus, and the school’s persistence rate is rising.

Decisionmaking informed by data. DEEP schools frequently combine stories with systematically collected information about student and institutional performance to estimate how well they’re doing. As the University of Kansas (KU) provost told us, “Data drive most of the things we do.” Most use some form of benchmarking and were among the early adopters of NSSE, using it in combination with other assessment tools to determine whether some aspects of student and faculty behavior could be better aligned.

Another example is the University of Michigan, which conducted six major studies of the undergraduate experience between 1986 and 2003. Alverno’s assessment-driven ability based education and Cal State Monterey Bay’s Outcomes-Based Education model are vehicles for coordinating and revising academic offerings and for improving instructional practices.

Moreover, the DEEP institutions report their performance. A steady stream of reports from KU’s Office of Institutional Research and Planning ensures that information is available for policy formation and decision-making there. Results from the General Education Assessment, Student Perceptions Survey,

Senior Survey, and NSSE are reported routinely to academic and student-life administrators. These data are then used to modify advising practices, curriculum requirements, and administrative structures. Three-person faculty teams at KU annually conduct interviews with about 120 graduating seniors to assess the impact of general education

courses, information that is then fed back to departments.

Longwood University and GMU operate under a Virginia state-mandated assessment requirement that has led to data-informed decisionmaking. Extensive faculty discussions at Longwood during the late 1980s led to a revision and expansion of its general education requirements in 1990. Today, Longwood evaluates the impact of these changes using multiple measures, including surveys, academic progress statistics, curriculum evaluations, and nationally normed discipline-specific achievement tests.

GMU faculty also responded to the state's assessment mandate. Every semester faculty members in Mason's New Century College develop a portfolio assessment for each course, on which they base changes in the course for the next term, while the GMU School of Nursing faculty use student focus groups to solicit feedback on course offerings and pedagogy.

Other GMU academic departments meet with the leaders of student organizations to obtain comments on courses and to plan revisions of them. Such efforts are essential, explained one faculty member: "You wonder if your assumptions about learning are correct because the student body constantly changes and comes from different backgrounds than do many of the faculty."

Miami University faculty members talk about the "sense of momentum" that is fueled by continuous assessment. Groups there such as the Liberal Education Council, Multicultural Council, and Committee for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching review programs regularly and recommend ways to strengthen them. The Committee on Student Assessment and Expectations is pursuing an ambitious benchmarking exercise whereby each department and program evaluates its own practices, makes comparisons to six

strong departments at other universities, and implements the best practices they find. More than 100 plans for improvement have ensued.

And to varying degrees DEEP schools are willing to confront "the brutal facts of reality," as Jim Collins puts it. Fayetteville State University and the University of Texas at El Paso, embar-

rassed by their poor graduation rates, did something about them. Sewanee was disappointed in its NSSE active and collaborative learning scores and revised its first-year program to encourage such activities.

In the early 1990s, Macalester commissioned a retention task force to examine first-year student retention, which was well below the 90 percent level to which campus leaders aspired. Identifying academic advising and student-faculty interaction as areas to enhance, Macalester now requires all students to take its effective—but previously "optional"—first-year seminar course and clarified the academic advising responsibilities of the faculty members teaching the course.

How Did They Do It?

While all 20 DEEP colleges and universities are inclined toward improvement, each took a different path. At some schools—Evergreen, Macalester, the University of Michigan, and Ursinus—the curriculum was the focal point for promoting student success. Gonzaga University, Longwood University, Miami University, and UMF use out-of-class activities to engage students with their classes and the institution.

Sometimes—for example, at Alverno College and Cal State Monterey Bay—a convergence of external forces, such as changing accreditation standards and an authentic desire to improve student learning, prompted schools to look closely at various aspects of the student experience and institutional performance.

At other schools—such as UMF, the University of Texas at El Paso, Fayetteville State, and GMU—visionary leaders pointed the way. At still others—Cal State Monterey Bay, Evergreen State, Michigan, Sewanee, Sweet Briar, and Wabash—a salient founding mission and strong campus culture sustain the necessary commitment to student success.

Although each DEEP school charted its own course to institutional improvement, there are some lessons from their experiences and circumstances that other colleges and universities can apply in their own context.

Stay the course. DEEP schools did not become high-performing institutions overnight: they had the advantage of people at the institution working on one or more initiatives for an extended period of time. Some of the key champions for change had been at the institution a long time, such as the KU provost and the Miami vice president for student affairs. Evergreen's academic dean graduated from the college; his knowledge of the institution and its founding values were instrumental in aligning the college's mission, educational philosophy, policies, and practices.

Provide leadership from every corner. Many institutions plod along without visionary executive leadership. This is not the case at DEEP schools. What sets most of these presidents apart from many of their counterparts is their holistic perspective on student development and institutional responsibilities for student success. They recognize that it is essential to provide a learning environment that combines high academic challenge with commensurate support.

They also surround themselves with talented colleagues—especially senior academic and student affairs officers—who work well together to implement policies and practices that realize the institution's mission. The relationship may not be causal, but it's worth noting that all the presidents had held academic appointments before being selected for their presidency.

As important as senior administrators are, effective leadership for student success is not concentrated exclusively in the executive ranks. Senior and junior faculty and staff members are encouraged to find ways to weave their ideas for improving teaching and learning into policies and everyday practices. Indeed, at many DEEP schools some of the more powerful innovations were introduced by faculty members.

Leaders are not necessarily expected to bring about the changes themselves but rather to motivate, monitor, encourage, and support others who are also working on the issues. Consequently, DEEP colleges and universities had lots

of people pulling in the same direction at the time we conducted this study.

Put someone in charge, but make it collaborative. There is an old adage that when everyone is responsible for something, no one is accountable for it. For this reason, DEEP schools usually assign some individual or group the responsibility for coordinating and monitoring the status and impact of its student-success initiatives. Sometimes the usual suspects are enlisted—faculty and staff members with a reputation for getting things done. Sometimes key

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newcomers help lead the way, as did a new academic dean at Sewanee and the new vice president of student affairs/dean of co-curricular life at Sweet Briar charged with pulling the in-class and out-of-class experience on campus closer together.

At the same time, collaboration is key. The success of Miami's efforts was helped immeasurably by an effective working relationship among the provost, the academic deans, and the vice president for student affairs. Evergreen's efforts benefited from a fixed-term "think force" of administrators, key faculty members, students, and governing board members. Such a high-profile group

adds legitimacy to change initiatives and can engender commitment from others. By connecting to similar activities and individuals across the institution, these groups create support and synergy for change.

Faculty collaboration is a key ingredient of curriculum revision. At Wofford College and Ursinus, for example, creating common intellectual experiences tended to neutralize the polarizing effects of disciplinary loyalty by compelling faculty to work together on a project that benefited the whole college and enhanced the overall quality of the student experience.

Sustainable improvements are not usually the work of a single unit. Rather, these innovations typically cross traditional organization boundaries, such as the collaborations between academic and student affairs on learning communities at the University of Texas, El Paso; the early alert programs at Cal State Monterey Bay, Fayetteville State, and Winston-Salem State University; and the first-year initiatives at Miami.

Moreover, the innovations often spread horizontally to different areas, further increasing the chances that many students will be touched by the effort. For example, efforts aimed at enhancing undergraduate education at the University of Michigan involved administrative leaders in the president's and provost's offices and were championed by the governing board, the division of student affairs, faculty members, and students. Consequently, the commitment to improving undergraduate programs became embedded in strategic planning activities and, subsequently, policy decisions.

Get and keep the right people. As Jim Collins says, it's important that the right people be on the bus. The change process starts with getting the best people in the hiring pool, something that DEEP provosts and academic deans are very intentional about and do very well. They unapologetically emphasize to potential faculty the importance of high-quality undergraduate teaching and probe the extent to which potential hires are enthusiastic about and committed to it. Some DEEP schools such as UMF feature an extended campus visit (three days) so that both the potential hire and institution can learn about one another in a variety of social and professional situations.

Lee Shulman reminds us that new faculty members are socialized during graduate school to do some things and not others and to value certain ideas and views about the professoriate, teaching, and learning over others. For this reason, newcomers need to be taught what the institution values; in some instances, they need to be countersocialized. This is best done by veteran faculty with support from administrators. Such efforts must be ongoing, not relegated to an hour during new faculty orientation.

The Ursinus vice president for academic affairs sponsors ongoing colloquia, attended by a few senior faculty, to introduce newcomers to various aspects of the college and to emphasize the institution's central focus on student learning and other values. Newcomers at KU hear plainly from senior faculty that they will occasionally be asked to set aside personal priorities for the good of the campus, such as when general education requirements are revised. As one veteran KU faculty member put it, "We give up a little to make the whole better," a legacy of the Populist heritage of its region.

Convert challenges into opportunities. As our research team colleague, Adrianna Kezar, pointed out, organizational change requires openness to surprises, a focus on creativity, and an appreciation for chance occurrences. In some cases, the triggering occurrence is a problem.

For example, Wofford's failure to obtain an NSF curricular-reform grant prompted it to revisit what it was doing and why, resulting in a renewed commitment to an interdisciplinary approach to general education, with learning communities as the featured delivery vehicle. Wheaton responded to enrollment shortfalls by changing its mission and reinvigorating its curriculum with a gender-balanced educational philosophy. In some instances, concerns about the state of affairs turned the institution in a different direction. UTEP adopted a new mission to take advantage of the inexorable shift in the demographics of its region.

What turns these problems into opportunities is when people—usually administrators, but often faculty members and occasionally students—identify successfully lobbies to have the issue addressed in an open forum. A faculty member at Evergreen State labeled this

"sensing negative restlessness. Working out problems is vital," he said. "We have to learn to collaborate and help faculty, staff, and students to have faith in the process." Skills like "taking the temperature of the group" and "building group consciousness" are part of Evergreen's ethos and take different forms at other DEEP schools.

Cultivate a campus culture that makes space for differences. Virtually every study of high-performing entities concludes that culture is the single most important element that must be altered

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and managed in order to change what an organization values and how it acts. Unless they are stitched into campus culture, as Peter Ewell once observed, institutional change initiatives tend to be "trains on their own track," running parallel but not converging.

"Culture" consists in part of tacit assumptions and beliefs that influence both the substance of policies, programs, and practices and how they are implemented. Culture also gives people a common language and values. A strong, coherent institutional culture that features talent development, academic achievement, and respect for differences is congenial to student success.

But institutional culture is not monolithic—especially as students, faculty, and staff members become more diverse—and cultures have their "shadow sides," aspects of institutional life that are problematic. Who and what are privileged and valued are often contested, as are interpretations of events and actions. Some issues, such as striking an appropriate balance between teaching and research, can quickly galvanize parties into staking out all-too-familiar positions that foreclose alternative interpretations or reconciliation efforts. This is true at DEEP colleges as well as at other colleges and universities.

To their credit, DEEP schools generally address such matters head on by creating opportunities for issues and differences to be vetted, understood, and managed. Faculty leaders and senior administrators often take the lead in such dialogues to keep differences from festering and paralyzing institutional functions. When done well, public conversations strengthen academic values and remind colleagues of their responsibilities to encourage and model reasoned discourse about complicated matters and differences of opinion.

A hot-button topic almost everywhere is diversity. At Sweet Briar, students debate not only whether the institution is doing enough to realize its purported aspirations for a diverse student body and faculty but the meaning of diversity itself. At Miami, the desire to move beyond a tolerance of diversity to the construction of a pluralistic community has been a topic of healthy campus discussion for more than a decade.

Avoid overload. The inclination to continually improve undoubtedly exacerbates the universal sense that people at DEEP schools—and just about everywhere else—are on overload. One faculty member described the teaching load at his institution as "crushing." Thus, one of the most important questions for institutions to address is not what to do next but what to *stop doing* so there is time and energy to invest in promising new initiatives. Otherwise there are few periods during which people give themselves permission to coast, catch their breath, and renew their spirit and energy.

To their credit, some DEEP schools are working on these matters. For instance, Ursinus has a panel of faculty studying workload demands, which increased after

the college introduced a package of curricular revisions to enhance student engagement and academic rigor. Evergreen State uses Disappearing Task Forces (DTFs) to address important governance matters as they arise in order to concentrate faculty service commitments on key issues. Unlike standing committees elsewhere, which take time away from teaching and advising, these task forces are subsequently decommissioned.

Overload can affect students, too, which is why Miami University introduced Choice Matters, an initiative that encourages undergraduates to more deliberately select among the many learning opportunities inside and outside the classroom that they will pursue in order to get the most out of college.

CONCLUSION

Our time on DEEP campuses has convinced us that an improvement-oriented ethos contributes to student success at these institutions. It sounds simple, even trite, but these institutions set priorities consistent with their espoused mission and educational purposes, fund these priorities to the extent possible, monitor their performance and that of their students, and use data to inform decisionmaking. They create effective learning environments for large numbers of students by linking together educational practices that challenge and support them. Institutional leaders champion and reward experimentation consistently with the school's mission and values.

If these very different colleges and universities can do this, so can many others. That's not to say it's easy. The path to institutional improvement is littered with failed and faltering interventions, because often too little thought is given to where the resources or energy will come from to *sustain* the efforts beyond a first or second cycle. But DEEP schools did not let sustainability paralysis set in. Highly self-critical, they do not allow themselves to become complaisant. Rather, they exhibit a persistent tendency to move forward with eyes wide open and alternative strategies in mind to deal with changing circumstances.

These institutions are doing many things from which other schools can learn. But they are not perfect—close inspection reveals flaws in each of these gemstones. For example, as good as they are, each has

one or more groups of students who are not as engaged as the institution would like. Although their priorities and properties make them attractive on a variety of levels, faculty and staff at DEEP schools are the first to admit that they would like to be even better than they are.

Indeed, this drive to improve is one of their more distinctive and endearing characteristics. More than any other trait, it may be the one that leads them to discover even more effective strategies for promoting student success. ☐

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To assist institutions in taking stock of the extent to which the conditions for student success exist on their campus, we developed the Inventory for Student Engagement and Success described in Kuh et al. (in press). ☺

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