Introduction

Re-Imagining the First Year of College (RFY)

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Massive changes have occurred to the context of American higher education over the past 50 years. The most impactful change has been the makeup of the student body. Increasing numbers of students are participating in higher education during a profound demographic change that is dramatically increasing diversity. Substantially greater numbers of students are coming to college without the background and preparation that were the hallmarks of an earlier generation. The typical question posed by this changing context is: how can these new students be prepared for college? However, for colleges and universities, a more compelling question is: how can colleges be prepared for this new generation of students?

This edition of the *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (JoSoTL) reports on experiences and insights into practice when the commitment is to change institutions, rather than students. In 2016, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) began a three year project, Re-Imagining the First Year (RFY), funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Strada Education Network. RFY has as its core commitment the idea that student success can be dramatically enhanced by changes in institutions. We now have empirically tested programs, strategies and approaches that, if adopted, can significantly increase student success. Yet, far too often, institutions are slow to change, relying on outdated practices and assumptions that continue to produce failure instead of success. The forty-four AASCU member institutions involved in this project identified and tested a series of programs, strategies and tools that could increase retention rates and success for first-year students. The first year of college has emerged as the critical barrier to college success, the point at which colleges experience the greatest loss of students. RFY sought to inspire redesigned approaches that work effectively for all members of an increasingly diverse, multicultural, undergraduate student body, and to work toward eliminating the achievement disparities that have plagued American higher education for generations.

The forty-four AASCU campuses that were selected to participate in the initiative represented a diverse set of AASCU institutions that vary by size (2,400-64,000), student demographics, geographic location (25 states), and first-year retention rate (55-94%). Each participating institution was asked to develop a campus team made up of administrators, faculty members, student affairs professionals and students. Campus teams examined a collection of integrated strategies, programs and approaches to improve student success. The RFY campuses were required to undertake change in four different areas when developing their campus plans. The idea underlying this requirement is that institutional change requires substantive change in many different areas simultaneously. The first of the four areas was "Institutional Intentionality." This category required evidence of campus-wide commitment, such as changes in funding, administrative structures or the use of a campus-wide data system. Intentionality included paying attention to, and devoting resources toward, policies, initiatives, and structures that make it easier for first-year students to thrive. The second category, "Curriculum," included examining university-wide, program-wide, department-wide, and individual course curricula to find the

bottlenecks and roadblocks that impede student success. The third, “Faculty and Staff,” required campuses to consider how interactions with faculty and staff, both inside and outside of the classroom, could affect the student experience. The final category, “Students,” challenged campuses to consider the student experience on campus; areas of focus included student engagement, student belonging, and growth mindset. Though the specific interventions for first-year students varied by campus, each of these students encountered a landscape with newly designed elements to help them succeed. For example, many first-generation students at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse were automatically enrolled in the first-year seminar. Many first-year students at Indiana University Kokomo received instruction on the concept of growth mindset. Students who struggled with academics at both institutions received newly revised probation letters written with student success in mind.

The articles in this edition of JoSoTL reflect work that was done across all four categories. One of the things RFY challenged faculty to do was consider the importance of data-informed decision-making related to courses. Data can tell an important story. Equity gaps often exist for first-generation students, low-income students, and students of color, even though a campus has relatively good overall retention or graduation success. On all of the RFY campuses, disaggregated data was shared with faculty and all members of the campus community. Campus leaders have consistently reported a growing awareness and acceptance of new strategies for helping students when disaggregated data is shared with faculty and staff. It turns out the “why” is important to faculty and staff. Without data, new efforts can feel like just one more initiative. Faculty and staff have been more motivated to engage in this work when they see the numbers.

It should come as no surprise that campus culture and leadership were also key factors that influenced change. The enthusiasm for this work has remained highest at campuses that have cultures that embrace teaching and learning and that have engaged multiple campus constituents in this work. Equally important, the RFY campuses that have had the most success implementing programs are those that already had strong leadership teams in place. They are campuses that have had a relatively positive relationship--between faculty and staff and administration, and between student affairs and academic affairs. Finally, they are campuses that place teaching and learning on par with faculty research.

Being a part of a national community can create an impetus for change. Time and again campus team leaders talked about how RFY gave them “permission” to do the work they already wanted to do. Being selected to be a part of a national initiative gave them credibility at home. The prestige of being selected and being a part of a national cohort also lent legitimacy to enact solutions that a campus might not have the social capital to enact on its own.

Lastly, what happens in the classroom can’t be overlooked. In talking with students, many team leaders reported student stories about the impact, either positive or negative, of a single professor. To underscore the importance of what happens in the classroom, with some of the RFY campuses we experimented with incorporating high-impact practices (HIPs) in the first-year classroom. Twenty of the RFY campuses were selected to use HIPs in the first-year classroom. Faculty members on each of the twenty campuses received professional development related to HIPs and brought these practices into their own first-year classrooms.

Like many campuses across the country, the RFY campuses have faced budget challenges and campus communities suffering from initiative fatigue. Yet they took on this challenge, recognizing that broad institutional change is hard but consequential work. The RFY campuses undertook a series of changes in programs, strategies and tools to increase success for first-year college students. Even at this early moment in what will be a long period of transformation, there is evidence of success on many of the participating campuses. Yet the unique work going on at each of the forty-four campuses underscores that there is no simple formula, no silver bullet. Each campus confronts a unique context

and set of circumstances. By working collectively, campuses can take strategies that have been used successfully in other settings, adapting them to increase student success on their own campus.

One other insight has emerged from this work. Focusing on student success, and considering how to change institutions to be more effective in working with a new generation of students, yields enormous benefits. Student success positively affects the trajectory of each student and his or her family. But student success is also critical to institutional success, as tuition increasingly pays the costs of operations. Student success also determines how effectively we compete in a global economy. Student success has a major impact on the strength and vitality of our democracy. Simply put, student success, for all students, will determine what kind of society we leave for future generations.