

Foreword

William J. McKinney

Indiana University
wjmckinn@iu.edu

Institutions such as the public colleges and universities represented in this volume are heir to my conceptualization of the great promise of American public higher education: Higher education exists to preserve and proliferate democratic values and economic opportunities; consequently, it also bears the responsibility for imparting those intellectual skills required to protect those values and provide those opportunities. Yet, in spite of this great promise of opportunity and in spite of what is now decades of effort, our public colleges and universities still have low graduation rates. According to the U.S. Department of Education, only 58.9% of the 2010 starting cohort graduated from public colleges and universities in their first six years. It is important to note that graduation rates, as well as first to second year retention rates, have risen slowly since the mid-1990s, as the six-year graduation rate for the 1996 cohort was 51.7%. Progress has been made, albeit very slowly.

Furthermore, while data have not been systematically compiled across the country, we know on our own campuses that our students leave us for myriad reasons including academic challenges, financial challenges, health issues, food/housing insecurity, and family responsibilities. One clear example of higher education's dedication to addressing these challenges and thereby to increasing student success and degree attainment is the transformative work of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' (AASCU) Re-Imagining the First Year of College (RFY) project, comprised of a dedicated network of academic professionals, some of whom are represented in this volume. The work herein highlights the RFY as an important national effort to improve how our public comprehensive universities serve their students and, by extension, their communities.

I am honored to have been associated with the RFY from its very beginning. In fall 2015, I was attending the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) Central Region Conference in Madison, Wisconsin, where AASCU's Vice President for Academic Leadership and Change, George Mehaffy, was the keynote speaker. I have had the good fortune to work with George over many years, most notably on AASCU's Red Balloon Project to promote innovation on our campuses. I was in the process of starting my new job with Indiana University (IU), and it had been far too long since I chatted with my friend and mentor. As I explained my new role with IU, that of Senior Advisor for Regional Campus Affairs, and my responsibilities for cross-campus collaboration on pressing strategic issues such as retention and civic engagement, it was clear that George had an idea. He always has ideas – and they are always very good ideas.

George began describing the details of RFY – the assembly of a competitively-selected group of approximately 40 AASCU campuses who would operate as a nationwide learning community. Guided by AASCU and its team of consultants, this learning community would work together over the next three years to implement innovative means of dramatically improving student success in the first year of college. Since first to second year retention is a precursor to graduation, it stood to reason that dramatically improving student success in the first year, colleges and universities would have a greater chance to improve their graduation rates.

He further explained that what we face is not a knowledge problem—we know why our students leave us. In fact, we have not only identified why they leave us, we have also, in some ways, begun to address those problems. We have addressed them, however, in small ways. Small increases in graduation rates over the last two decades tell us that we know how to address low retention and graduation rates. What we do not do, however, is implement this knowledge in systematic and sustainable ways. What we face, George noted, is an implementation problem. That is, how do we make the best ideas work, not as pilot studies, but across our campuses, within our unique cultures, for the benefit of our students?

I was intrigued by this project, and when he informed me that AASCU was hoping that a state system would participate in the RFY, I knew immediately that, while not technically a state system, the five IU

regional campuses would be a perfect fit. During these past three years, the RFY has become embedded in our campus cultures and, consequently, our campuses have each benefited from increases in retention and graduation. RFY participation, through its focus on substantive and sustainable innovation, has also led to an energized entrepreneurial atmosphere on our campuses. What you will find in the pages that follow is the result of innovation and collaboration at its best on other campuses as well.

The editors of this special edition have done a commendable job selecting some of the very best work in the RFY over the last three years. They describe the implementation of various RFY projects at a wide range of AASCU institutions. The work falls into roughly three categories: Course/curriculum design/re-design, faculty development, and applied psychology.

The first category, focusing on course/curriculum design/re-design, is by far the most broad. The five articles in this category describe using the RFY as a catalyst for building collaborative learning communities in the major, fundamentally redesigning a writing program, and the continually improving Middle Tennessee State's summer bridge/early arrival program. What these articles, and the work they describe, have in common is a commitment to building a more learner-centered culture.

In the parlance of the RFY, to move toward a more learner-centered culture means moving away from the traditional teacher-centered culture that has always dominated higher education. This does not in any way, however, mean that the roles of faculty and staff are less important. Hence, as the second category of essays in this collection demonstrates, institutions that commit themselves to moving toward learner-centered cultures must simultaneously commit to a greater emphasis on faculty and staff development. This volume includes articles that run the range of highlighting experiential learning fellows at Indiana University Kokomo to a scholarship-focused approach to faculty development at Northern Arizona University. For centuries, scholars have focused their attention on the world outside of the academy, but these essays highlight how scholarly rigor turned inward and using the scholars' tools of analysis, synthesis, and critique only enhances the work we do for students.

The final category focuses on the student mindset and the application of cognitive and developmental psychology. From its inception, the RFY has made use of our increased understanding of our students' cognitive development, particularly the work of David Yeager and his colleagues. The articles herein demonstrate how gaining a greater understanding of precisely who our students are can yield positive results in student success metrics such as retention and persistence to graduation and, most importantly, how this understanding has been successfully implemented at St. Cloud State and Indiana University Northwest.

By improving retention and graduation rates, RFY campuses are fulfilling the great promise of American higher education by securing educational and economic opportunities for many more students. The RFY's transformative collaborative model has allowed many of these campuses to benefit from each other and become exemplars for other campuses across the country. I hope that, as you read the articles in this volume, your campus and your students benefit as well.