



A Case for a More Successful Approach to Student Success

How can higher education get better at graduating students?

Student Success is becoming an increasingly hot topic in higher education. Virtually every day, we engage in conversations with institutions concerning what they can do to partner with their students to improve academic outcomes.

On Feb. 24, 2009, **President Barack Obama** publicly declared an ambitious goal to a joint session of Congress that will require dramatic improvement in student success saying that “by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.”¹ **Kevin Carey, Education Sector’s policy director** (and former director of policy research for the Education Trust), argues that meeting Obama’s goals will require enhanced accountability from states to influence their institutions to improve graduation rates, including performance-based funding.²

Former President Bush’s Department of Education Secretary, Margaret Spellings, emphasized the need to improve outcomes in a highly publicized public/private commission report now known as the “Spellings Report.” The findings touch on a variety of topics, with a focus on measuring higher education institutions’ ability to help students graduate.³

What is lacking in all of this talk about student success is almost as interesting – a viable way for institutions to make progress on this important issue and measure that progress. Obama’s bold goal, Carey’s calls for accountability and the Spellings report’s notion of a national database to track student progress don’t help an industry get better at graduating students.

Confusing the matter further is the topic of access to higher education. Measures of accessibility currently address only the percentage of people that are admitted into institutions of higher education. Most would agree, however, that the benefits to the students in question and to society are directly related to completing a degree – not starting one. In fact, starting but not completing (as is sadly the norm for many “at risk” demographics) arguably places students in a worse position than if they had never been admitted in the first place (especially from a short-term financial perspective).

How, then, can higher education get better at graduating students?

Understanding Graduation Roadblocks

First, we must understand the problems that restrict graduation rates and their complexities. As mentioned above, most well-meaning people go straight to measuring graduation rates (usually six-year) without even discussing the issues getting in the way of improving those rates. This is roughly analogous to saying we must cure a disease without acknowledging that a cure involves research focused on the causal factors and how to treat them.

The best place to start is getting students the courses they need conflict free. Students themselves, in fact, have been saying this for some time. An annual report on student satisfaction, conducted by Noel-Levitz, asks students: 1) Are you satisfied with your institution? 2) What are the key challenges that need to be addressed? Each year, satisfaction hovers in the 55 - 58 percent range with the #1 student-reported challenge for all types of institutions surveyed (four-year public, four-year private and two-year community/technical) being required course access. Most concerning is the fact that institutions, in a self-evaluation contained in the same survey, fail to identify this problem anywhere in the top 25.⁴

In order to solve the course access problem, our industry must admit that this is not just the students’ problem and then attack it – addressing all of its complexities. Course access can be impacted in four main ways: 1) student confusion, 2) lack of sufficient seats in gateway courses, 3) course sections being offered at times when students are not available, and 4) course sections being offered at times that conflict with other needed course sections.

1) Student confusion can result from unnecessarily complex degree rules, inadequate advising and/or inadequate student support tools. Many institutions will admit that, even in these times of financial constraints, they don’t remove courses or rules from degrees in proportion to new course options or rules that are added each year. The result is what some call “curricular glut.” Most institutions don’t have the budget for the kind of one-on-one advising or advisor training that they’d like. This puts more pressure on the availability of self-help student support tools like degree audit reports and on-line student

planners. These tools, when made available, represent major progress compared to what was available in the past. Even so, they rarely address the student-specific complexities of degree completion to allow true self help (course eligibility, course reuse, seats availability, student time/day availability, etc.). The best approach to the problem of student confusion is a combination of easy-to-understand degree rules and a fully interactive degree completion planner.

2) A lack of sufficient seats in gateway courses is usually the result of a lack of good course demand analytics. Transparency regarding each student's progress to degree and his or her most important courses in an upcoming term is needed to change the industry norm of faculty-centric departmental scheduling. Reporting is a good start, but reports can not address the complexities of which specific students will need seats in courses not yet offered. This level of student-specific course needs analytics requires algorithms to process academic history and how degree audit systems apply it, course importance and eligibility, credit hour load and other factors impacting course needs. Anecdotal information coming from student complaints is not sufficient to change this culturally-ingrained practice. In most cases, when course demand information is available, departments discover that they have too few offerings of some courses and too many offerings of others. They can then refine how they allocate their critical faculty resources to the maximum benefit of students (with the added bonus of reducing the significant waste from unneeded offerings).

3) Course sections being offered at times when students are not available is also a problem of inadequate information to support better decision-making. We have only seen a handful of institutions (mostly Career Colleges) successfully survey their students regarding availability. While such a survey takes an investment in an on-line tool to collect and interpret this data, the benefits are significant. Similar to the problem of sufficient seats, student availability analysis allows departments to balance offerings on a course-by-course basis. In this case, it's the balancing across the various "time zones" in a schedule (versus various courses offered by a department). An additional benefit is that this information allows institutions to move certain offerings out of primetime confidently, reducing the traditional space and faculty bottlenecks that result from the myth that all students want to take classes from 9:00-2:00 Monday-Thursday.

4) Course sections being offered at times that conflict with other needed course sections is the most subtle issue, and perhaps the most difficult to address. While spreading offerings away from primetime will help to an extent, a more optimal schedule requires information regarding the two previously addressed course access challenges: student-specific course demand analysis and student-specific time/day availability. Armed with this information, and algorithms designed to process this information as inputs to

optimize schedules, offering times can be made or refined to minimize student conflicts. Many traditional institutions that roll-forward schedules each year are best served to use an algorithm to simulate student registration before it occurs. This helps identify and resolve student scheduling conflicts that may arise.

Graduation Rate Metrics

Finally – now that we've addressed the important complexities holding back graduation rates and the best practices to address them – a discussion about graduation rate metrics is in order. Unfortunately, there are significant limitations to the value of these measures, as well. Many argue that it is impossible to determine a "fair" timeline for graduation, citing the vanishing breed that is referred to as the "traditional" full-time student. This sentiment has led to the six-year graduation rate becoming the primary focus, even though the most common program of study is still designed so that a full-time student can complete it in four years. Another issue is that the measure, itself, tracks students who are already graduated. How about the students that the institution can still assist in successful completion? A better measure for this critical population is degree velocity, or the pace that students complete productive credits toward completion in various programs and demographic sub-populations. Who is on a four-year pace? Five-year? Six-year?

Advanced Student-Specific Analytics

Ultimately, we envision an industry wherein advanced, student-specific analytics is the norm. We are working aggressively with our clients to fulfill this vision. What we are already seeing is not only progress and transparency facilitated by evidence-based decisions, but also a growing list of metrics that measure progress in addressing the course access problem. We have informally started a central database of multiple clients that compares an institution's effectiveness and progress regarding these issues against other institutions. Once such metrics become more prevalent, ideally collected in a nation-wide database, we believe that the best practices that lead to improved graduation rates will be better understood, supported and executed. Then, and only then, can our industry successfully achieve student success.

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Works Cited:

¹Obama, Barack. Address to Joint Session of Congress. The United States Capitol. Washington, DC. 24 February 2009.

²Carey, Kevin. "A Race to the Top." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 7 March 2009: Web. 13 July 2010.

³United States. U.S. Department of Education. A Report of the Commission Appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. Washington, DC. 2006. Print.

⁴Noel-Levitz, Inc. *National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report*. 2009.