

Discussion 7

Supporting Student Success at Community Colleges: An Institutional Research Perspective

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Introduction

In setting a vision for Education in the United States President Obama has stated “Now is the time to build a firmer, stronger foundation for growth that will not only withstand future economic storms, but one that helps us thrive and compete in a global economy. It’s time to reform our community colleges so that they provide Americans of all ages a chance to learn the skills and knowledge necessary to compete for the jobs of the future.” In creating this focus on community colleges President Obama is calling for an additional 5 million graduates from the nation’s community colleges by the year 2020. The question for Institutional Research professionals both as individuals and collectively as a

Julie Carpenter-Hubin, Chair of the 2010 AIR Forum, and Bill Knight, 2009 President of AIR, invited AIR members to participate in a series of discussion groups on pressing issues in the field of institutional research. This document is one of the 8 resulting White Papers created to summarize and record these thoughtful discussions by leaders in IR. AIR wishes to acknowledge the discussion leaders and participants, and the members of the Forum Committee who arranged these sessions and produced this summary. Permission is granted to disseminate this document, with proper attribution, for non-commercial purposes.

profession is how to best support local, state and national efforts to improve student success at community colleges, including but not limited to increasing the number of graduates.

In an effort to address this question a group of experienced community college Institutional Research professionals gathered during the 50th AIR Forum in Chicago, Illinois to discuss and formulate an answer. The primary question was explored by focusing on three supporting questions:

1. What is/should be the connection between Institutional Research and student success, with success including graduation, transfer, persistence, course success and moving through developmental into college-level coursework?
2. How have Institutional Research data been used on campuses to increase Certificate and Associate degree completions and transfer rates? Are there any approaches that have been especially effective?
3. What role does information dissemination play in supporting student success? What metrics are both appropriate and feasible to use for measuring student success?

Discussion Results

How do IR professionals see their role in supporting student success in the community college?

Question #1 examined the connection between Institutional Research and student success:

1. What is/should be the connection between Institutional Research and student success, with success including graduation, transfer, persistence, course success and moving through developmental into college-level coursework?

The most important element identified in advancing student success at community colleges was that Institutional Researchers must be active and assertive in planning, implementing and evaluating

initiatives to improve student success. Institutional Researchers cannot just be passive purveyors of data and information. It is important that they be involved and pro-active in student success discussions, strategy development, and research from the beginning.

Second, IR professionals must be connected not just to student success initiatives, but to other aspects of the institution and the external environment. For example, IR professionals need to be familiar with accreditation, accountability and regulatory requirements and expectations regarding student success.

Third, given the enormous demands placed on Institutional Research offices in community colleges along with the limited staffing, it is important to be connected to technology as an element of supporting student success. This connection not only includes using software applications and knowing the student information system data elements, but also communication and social networking tools such as Twitter and Facebook. Leveraging 21st century communication tools to communication with students in support of success is critical. Institutional Researches must connect data and information to the stories of student success (or lack thereof). For example, what are the implications or the meaning of the data? What knowledge can be derived about student success from the data and information? How can student success initiatives be improved? Fourth, Institutional Researchers need to be able to plan and execute research studies about student success at the detailed level using multiple methods. In planning these studies researchers should utilize scholarly literature as well as consider sophisticated techniques from both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. In addition, throughout the design, analysis, and reporting process it is critically important to be connected to the college stakeholders so that discussions can occur about the implications and meaning of data and information in an effort to create knowledge that supports student success.

Question #2 examined the use of data:

2. How have Institutional Research data been used on campuses to increase Certificate and Associate degree completions and transfer rates? Are there any approaches that have been especially effective?

Participants focused on best reporting practices that were viewed as supporting student success. The first practice identified was providing a regular summary of students who have made significant progress towards an award. Regularly reporting these “nearbies” (those students that are close to completing award requirements) allows appropriate follow-up to occur with students to encourage them to complete their programs of study. In those situations when students leave without completing it also allows the college to obtain important feedback concerning why students have departed prior to completion.

A second recommended reporting practice is to provide reports concerning student transitions and pathways. The National Student Clearinghouse and state higher education database systems, if they are available, enable us to measure student success with transfer as the indicator. A third practice is to regularly report on the progress of developmental students and to look at the extent to which students in developmental courses progress to and succeed in college-level courses. A fourth practice is to develop a systematic processes to conduct program-based research including program reviews, needs assessments for new programs, and the success of students in gateway courses such as English composition, college-level math and introductory psychology and sociology. These courses are keys to student success because they provide essential academic skills or meet general education and degree requirements. A fifth best practice is to examine institutional policies that may impede or foster student success. For example, some institutions have discovered an association between the date of registration in a class and success in it, leading them to eliminate late registration.

Question #3 examined the role of information dissemination:

3. What role does information dissemination play in supporting student success? What metrics are both appropriate and feasible to use for measuring student success?

The major themes that arose from the discussions around the third question about information dissemination focused around connections, communications, quality and flexibility. Relative to connections, participants emphasized that the information Institutional Research disseminates must be connected to the college's strategic plan and to its student success agenda and initiatives. Data and information must be perceived as both informative and useful, and as guides for improvement.

IR professionals must communicate data and information in forms that are understandable and quickly accessible to recipients. Arcane statistical analyses and dense data tables may be impressive in the IR world but do little to advance appreciation or use of IR products in the larger community of student success stakeholders. In developing their communication approaches Institutional Research professionals must be able to determine how much information is required, how often it is required, what the quality must be and how the information can best be presented. This again highlights the importance of the connections that must exist between the Institutional Research professional and college community.

Conclusion:

How do Institutional Researchers support student success?

Summarizing the discussions that were held over the course of 90 minutes six major themes emerged:

1. Present data meaning and implications rather than just the data.
2. Measure what is important rather than what is easy.

3. Make data and information consumable.
4. Use the data and information to identify the roadblocks to success.
5. Close the loop between research and institutional behavior.
6. Be proactive, strategic and assertive in supporting student success.

The challenges and opportunities facing Institutional Research professionals are great as community colleges increase focus on student success and completion however, so are the rewards. Institutional Researchers must be aggressive advocates for integrating a culture of evidence and inquiry that includes systematic planning, budgeting, and assessment into the college's environment.