

Strategic Enrollment Management for Washington Community and Technical Colleges

Introduction

In July 2009, President Barack Obama presented the “American Graduation Initiative,” designed to strengthen America’s position in the world economy through workforce education and skill development. The president challenged the country to once again become the world’s leader in college graduates by setting a goal of 5 million additional community college graduates by 2020. This public call for action by the highest office in the country places a substantial onus on community colleges to strengthen their operations and address what has historically been a dismal graduation rate.

Washington state set similar goals through the “Road Map:” achieve a 70 percent postsecondary attainment rate for adults by 2023.ⁱ To meet this goal, the state requires 380,000 new credential holders.ⁱⁱ The key strategies to accomplish this goal include closing the achievement gap for underrepresented students; improving upon postsecondary recruitment, retention, and completion; and affordability.

The Washington state community and technical college (CTC) system is well-positioned to play a major role in meeting the national and state goals, but it has similar challenges as other institutions across the nation with retention and

completion. In addition, enrollment in the CTC’s has declined 21 percent in the past 15 years while tuition has doubled. Interestingly enough, full-time equivalent enrollments (FTES) have increased approximately 7 percent in the same time period. However, like the rest of the nation, retention and completion rates did not increase during that time even as more students started attending full-time. This suggests a change in the population of adults who are coming to college now than at a time when enrollment was significantly higher. The number of high school graduating classes is flat and more of the recent graduates (traditional-aged students) are attending four-year institutionsⁱⁱⁱ. The trends are clear: that in order to meet the state’s goals, it will require bringing in populations of students who have not historically participated in higher education and implementing deliberate strategies to keep them engaged and supported long enough to complete a credential.

The system is dedicated to addressing the challenges ahead in order to meet the state goals, and current conditions suggest this is a prime-time to engage in a thoughtful strategic enrollment management process.

Retention research and at-risk students

Community colleges were designed with the overarching mission of open access for all, but historically this has not translated into significant student success. Only slightly more than one-third of community college entrants earn a credential of any kind in a six-year time period.^{iv} In the CTC system, the average completion rate for new degree-seeking students (after four years) is approximately 28 percent.^v Researchers have studied the issues of student retention and completion for decades with the goal of discovering which students are at risk in the hope of creating strategies and policies to improve upon practices and facilitate success.

Despite the volume of research on student success, the most studied issue in higher education, national completion rates in both the 2- and 4-year sectors remain virtually unchanged. Because the ultimate end goal of higher education is for students to complete a program of study, it only makes sense that degree completion is a critical core indicator. However, before students can complete, they must enroll in and persist in the institution long enough to achieve that goal. Consequently, enrollment management strategies must address both the front end process of recruiting and enrolling students as well as student supports for keeping students once they matriculate.

The vast literature on retention has resulted in themes that point to common risk factors of attrition. These include being academically underprepared for college level work, not entering college directly after high school, attending college part-time, being a single

parent, being financially independent, caring for children at home, working more than 30 hours per week, and being a first-generation college student^{vi}. In addition, degree completion rates are considerably lower for low-income students and students of color^{vii}. In the Washington state CTC's, the completion rate after four years for historically underrepresented students of color¹ is 22 percent compared to 29 percent for white and Asian students.^{viii} Historically underrepresented students who are also unprepared for college, single parents, etc., are at an even greater risk and need the most intentional student supports. Closing the achievement gap for underrepresented students is a key strategy for the attainment goals and will need to be a focus point within a strategic enrollment management plan.

Engagement

A concept which has been heavily studied as a variable affecting retention is student *engagement*. This is multi-faceted and includes connection to the campus environment, collaborative learning experiences, and student-faculty interaction. The student integration model clearly describes this concept in that “student persistence is a function of dynamic relationships between the individual and other actors in the college and the home community. Increased levels of academic and social integration are presumed to lead to greater commitment to the institution and to the goal of graduation.”^{ix} In a study of dislocated workers within the CTC system, progress, attendance status, occupation, and goal commitment were the factors that most significantly impacted retention. In other words, a student’s perception about the practical value of their education and their commitment to

¹ Historically underrepresented students of color are from race/ethnic groups that show an achievement gap

attain that value was strongly linked to retention.^x

Other research has identified similar themes around connection and commitment and that feelings of isolation, whether it be a lack of connection and relationship to the faculty or in an online environment, can affect a student's ability to enroll, fit into, and stay in the higher education community.^{xi} Both concepts of active and collaborative learning and student-faculty interaction are important to consider within the context of online education, particularly in community colleges. In a study of differing attrition rates between online and face-to-face courses, researchers discovered the major factors for attrition were isolation, academic challenge, ownership, and acquiescence. The isolation factor was defined by the idea of a surreal classroom, lack of student-faculty interaction, and lack of student-to-student connection.^{xii}

These concepts exemplify the need for at-risk groups (those unfamiliar with or disconnected from higher education) to have positive levels of student-faculty interaction and a sense of connection to the institution. For the community college student, typical social integration that would occur on a residential four-year campus is not always possible simply due to the differences in family backgrounds, schedules, and priorities that those students have. Consequently, academic integration in the classroom is likely to have the greatest effect for students to feel that sense of community and belonging in college.

Student success strategies and policy

As indicated above, despite all the research and identification of student risk factors there has not been a definitive change in outcomes. Researchers^{xiii} pose some possible reasons why this might be the case. First, the basis of most

research is on students who have *not* enrolled, persisted, and completed. Equal attention has not been given to factors that are associated with successful retention and completion, so part of the picture is missing. Further, the theories developed by way of the research (engagement as an example) has not always translated into definitive action steps that institutions can apply, especially in the community college setting. Part-time students for example, who are most prevalent in community college setting (65 percent of all state funded students in 2016 in Washington^{xiv}), are often ignored within theories of engagement as they do not fit the traditional student experience. Part-time students typically take longer to complete, are less engaged, and spend more time caring for dependents and working full time.^{xv} In the Washington state CTC system, the year-to-year retention rate for part-time students is 38 percent compared to 53 percent for full-time, and their completion rate after four years is just 20 percent compared to 33 percent for full-time.^{xvi}

Online students is another area that is understudied with respect to engagement theory. In fact, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) removes all online students from the sampling frame as the questionnaire is mostly focused on foot-on-campus and face-to-face classroom interactions. The Washington state CTC data confirms a difference in course completion rates for face-to-face and online offerings.^{xvii} Fall quarter 2015 English 101 online courses had 78 percent completion while face-to-face had 89 percent completion. In Math 141 (pre-calculus), online courses had just 63 percent while face-to-face showed 80 percent. This is critical information for the college system to consider with regards to increased online offerings as a possible strategic enrollment management strategy.



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Enrollments may increase, but are the supports in place to ensure that students are successful?

Strategic enrollment management

The level of integration and engagement a student attributes to their institution is a crucial underpinning for strategic enrollment management strategy. Students who do not feel connected to the institution or fully understand the value behind their commitment are likely to leave before they reach their goals.^{xviii} Marketing and recruitment play an initial role in this critical relationship building from an institutional fit perspective, which must continue on throughout a student’s enrollment and progression through their education. The overarching key conditions for student success include commitment, expectations, support, feedback, and involvement.^{xix} Support more specifically includes academic, social, and financial conditions. These are areas where we tend to see common student service strategies or policies developed, but is also where student learning has to be at the core and connected to the supports (such as attaching a student success course to a gatekeeper course). Faculty and staff development for how to meet the needs of the institution’s population, both in and out of the classroom, is crucial.

Beyond the purview of the direct connection with students, the more wide-reaching circle of what it takes to move student outcomes involves entities outside of the institution and policy development. Researchers summarize

examples of these key domains of policy as indicated in Table 1.^{xx}

These domains demonstrate how the critical path of strategic enrollment management not only begins prior to enrollment but also involves external partners to postsecondary education. From a policy perspective, it suggests considerations of things such as placement assessments, financial aid policy, connection to K-12, workforce services, and adult basic education services. The full picture is important to consider as we come full circle to the ultimate goal of this work, which is increasing educational attainment across the State of Washington.

The following are offered as key steps for establishing a structured enrollment management process:^{xxi}

1. Identify the goals: what is the mission and what are we trying to achieve with this work?
2. Analyze data on enrollment trends and at-risk student populations and identify where there are gaps
3. Focus on a limited number of the most critical issues
4. Identify metrics and set attainment goals
5. Establish the strategies that will be most effective given resource availability and needs of the institution. Identify the commitments and accountabilities for the strategies
6. Create a feedback loop for assessment and follow up to include communication.

Table 1			
Preparation	Finance	Access	Accountability
P-20	State support	Outreach	Assessment
Early assessment	Institutional aid	Capacity	Accreditation
Teacher preparation	Federal student aid	Articulation/transfer	State mandates
High standards	Tax policy	Remediation	Market competition
Alignment of standards and assessment	Tuition policy		



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- ⁱ <http://www.wsac.wa.gov/strategic-action-plan>
- ⁱⁱ Dupree, D. (2015). CTC role in WSAC roadmap goals: Issue brief. Retrieved from <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/reports/socioeconomic-research.aspx>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Education Research and Data Center High school feedback reports <http://www.erdccdata.wa.gov/hsfb.aspx>
- ^{iv} Goldrick-Rab, Sara. (2010). Challenges and Opportunities for Improving Community College Student Success. *Review of Educational Research*, 80: 437-469. DOI: 10.3102/0034654310370163
- ^v SA Cohorts dashboard, 2017, overall completion after 4 years
- ^{vi} Kuh, G., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J., Bridges, B. & Hayek, J. (2007). *Piecing together the student success puzzle: Research, propositions and recommendations: ASHE Higher Education Report*. Wiley Subscription Services, Inc. A Wiley Company at Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- ^{vii} Adelman (2006)
- ^{viii} SA cohorts dashboard, 2017, highest achievement by 4th year
- ^{ix} Kuh et al, 2007, pg. 14
- ^x Simmons, D. (1995). Retraining dislocated workers in the community college: Identifying factors for persistence. *Community College Review*, 23(2), 47.
- ^{xi} Bontrager, B. (2004). Strategic enrollment management: Core strategies and best practices. *College and University*, Winter 2004. Retrieved from http://registrar.iupui.edu/emc/ppt/bontrager_core_strategies.pdf
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- ^{xii} Bambara, Davies, & Athey (2009)
- ^{xiii} Tinto, V. & Pusser, B. (2006). Moving from theory to action: Building a model of institutional action for student success. National Postsecondary Education Cooperative.
- ^{xiv} Fall quarter enrollment and staffing report, 2016. <https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/research/fall-quarter-research/2016/2016-fqr-2-enrollments.pdf>
- ^{xv} Laird, T., & Cruce, T. (2009). Individual and environmental effects of part-time enrollment status on student-faculty interaction and self-reported gains. *Journal of Higher Education*, 80(3), 290-314. Retrieved from Academic Search Complete database.
- ^{xvi} SA cohorts dashboard, 2017, retention and completion after 4 years by full/part time status
- ^{xvii} eLearning course completion rates <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/research/datatables/elearning-data.aspx>
- ^{xviii} Bontrager, B. (2004).
- ^{xix} Tinto & Pusser (2006)
- ^{xx} Tinto & Pusser (2006)
- ^{xxi} Kerlin, C. (2014). A community college roadmap for the strategic enrollment management journey. Retrieved from http://consulting.aacrao.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/AACRAO_Roadmap_FINAL.pdf