

## **Brainstorming Structural Changes for Improving First-time College Student Success at Laney**

Focusing on the Fall cohorts of matriculating first-time college students, identify, discover or invent a practical structural changes that will substantially improve their initial fall to spring and fall to fall persistence rates (and, thus, ultimately their degree/certificate completion and transfer rates) that are consistent with or expresses the following learning principles:

- The greater the time on learning tasks, the greater the learning.
- The more deeply students are involved in relevant communities (e.g., study groups, coral groups, learning communities, clubs), the more likely are students to persist and learn.
- Success breeds success, failure breeds failure. No one likes to do things he or she is not good at.
- Students who know clearly what they are supposed to learn, learn it better or faster than those who don't.
- Students with a personal connection to and support from college faculty or staff persist and are more successful than those who don't; relationships must be meaningful to help students feel connected to school and to leverage them to gain information.
- Students who do not see value in their coursework often behave in counterproductive ways.
- The first semester is absolutely critical to student success and persistence.
- (New) Students who do not have clear goals or a genuine understanding of what college is worthwhile are likely to be derailed by minor challenges and setbacks.

Here are some of the facts we know about students at Laney:

- Some 2,000 to 2,200 new matriculating first-time college students enter Laney each fall.
- For Fall 2009, 32% of these students persisted to Fall 2010. This is down from the best recent fall to fall persistence rate of 39% for the Fall 2006 cohort.
- 10% of these entering first-time college cohorts earn a degree or certificate within six years.
- 10% of these entering first-time college cohorts transfer to a four-year institution within six years.
- 17% of these entering first-time college cohorts earn a degree/certificate or transfer within six years (unduplicated count).
- Entering application (matriculation) goals show no relation to ultimately earning a degree, certificate or transferring. Exactly 17% of those saying they have such as a goal achieve the goal, the same as those without such a goal. Even completely "Undecideds" earn degrees or certificates or transfer at a rate only very slightly less at 16%.
- Full-time students persist and otherwise have higher success rates than part-time students.
- 28% of students starting in English 201A complete the sequence to English 201B (or ESL 21B) and then English 1A successfully (i.e., with a C or better grade) within a four-year period.
- 11% of students starting in Math 253 complete the sequence to Math 210 and then Math 203 successfully within a four-year period.

Some facts from research on other campuses strongly show or imply:

- Retaining students from initial fall to spring and initial fall to fall has a geometrically increasing impact on further persistence and ultimate degree/certificate/transfer rates. For example, 10 percentage points added fall to spring persistence, a 20% increase on a base rate of 50% adds

virtually that same 10 percentage point to the fall to fall rate, a 33% increase on a base of 30% and so on, ultimately almost doubling the graduation rate.

- It takes very little information for students to shift their goals. For example, 30% to 40% of those 22,000 students participating in the LARC statewide Math Outcomes Study changed their goal over the course of the one-semester study period. About the same percentage change their goal from initial application to the completion of an initial meeting with a counselor or as a result of a three-hour college orientation session. Most change is to higher aspirations.
- Entering students do not like taking below college basic skills classes. They usually postpone them whenever they have a choice.

Some good assumptions are:

- Entering community college students are virtually clueless about their abilities, potential, and goals. Their critical thinking skills, and hence their decision-making, is poor.
- What works for special populations, e.g., at-risk Hispanic students or economically disadvantaged students, almost certainly works for all other students. There is no need to focus on special populations if the goal is to increase institutional success and completion rates.
- There is little downside risk to thoughtful substantial changes that affect all students. Hence, pilot programs may only delay changes that would greatly benefit all (or all relevant) students.
- No one likes to be required to do anything. Therefore design structures and environments that naturally result in desired behaviors.

Some facts or thoughts about the organizational design of colleges:

- Colleges are not designed for or to improve student learning and success over time. They were designed (for good historical reasons) to deliver quality lectures in fixed increments over a fixed time period to relatively passive listeners. All other activities are much harder to do.
- Designing a college to produce learning and to improve at this task over time seems to imply revering or doing the opposite of just about everything we do. For example:
  - We now hold time constant and let the learning vary by requiring course completion within a 16/17 week semester and varying the grades of students. The opposite would be to hold learning constant (competency-based outcomes) and let the time vary (take only 3 weeks if you can but 20 or more weeks if you need to).
  - We lecture in class and students do homework at home. The opposite would be to provide lectures accessible at home (via streaming video, for example) and spend class time on homework and personal one-on-one coaching or tutoring. (This is being done to great effect in a basic skills math sequence at Madisonville CC in Kentucky).
  - We now have one teacher per classroom. The opposite would be multiple teachers per class/course such as in learning community courses.
  - The faculty does not, in general, function as a corporate team but rather as a collection of individual entrepreneurs operating independently and privately. The opposite would be teams of faculty designing and creating powerful learning environments.
  - Faculty (and the organization) conceive of their task as primarily delivering quality instruction, i.e., as professing their expertise in lectures. The opposite would be to see oneself individually and corporately as designers and creators of ever more powerful learning environments which may or may not require ongoing faculty involvement.

- College revenue is a function of hours of instruction and the number of students instructed. The opposite is to attach revenue to clearly defined student learning and success outcomes. Pay for results not process.
- Colleges have but one, essentially, pedagogy that all students must adapt to or fail; namely the lecturing of one teacher per classroom. The opposite would be a variety of pedagogies and learning environments enabling students to choose those that best suit his or her learning style.
- Changing the design of college organizational structures can have very powerful impacts on improving student success and in empowering faculty to enable students to succeed because of the principle of leverage. Current structures disempower faculty and inhibit innovations in learning environments, particularly scaled innovations, with respect to improving student learning. For example, the silos-of-one that encase faculty greatly inhibits faculty team work for improving student learning and learning environments. Some examples of the power of structural changes are:
  - A university increased its five-year graduation rate by 50% by a structural change in the first semester of incoming freshmen.
  - A community college increased its basic skills math course success rates by 10 to 15 percentage points by simply allowing any student, upon request, to take up to 8 more weeks of time to complete the course.
  - A community college increases semester-to-semester persistence by offering staggered start semesters, i.e., they offered a new semester (of 16 weeks) every two weeks.
  - Learning communities substantially increase student learning and persistence.
  - Required and monitored study groups increase course success and persistence.
- Teachers matter. Students need effective teachers and staff. However, faculty effectiveness with respect to student learning is greatly inhibited by our structural design. The point of changing structures is to free faculty and staff to do what works for learning and to enable them to be have a far greater impact than they do under the existing design. It is to leverage their best efforts.
- The path of least resistance (i.e., of least cost in time and effort) in the existing structure is for teachers to fall back on simply lecturing. All other pedagogies require substantially more time, effort and creativity. Can we create an organizational design that creates other paths of pedagogy that offer no more resistance than lecturing?