Promising Practices for Promoting Community College Student Success

Community colleges across the country are rising to the challenge of improving student success and college completion. As they grapple with that challenge, they quite naturally raise questions about what exactly they should be doing. What is known about effective educational practice? What makes a practice effective? And how do we bring effective practice to scale, turning small accomplishments into widespread improvement?

To help colleges answer these questions, the Center has launched a new project focused on Identifying and Promoting High-Impact Educational Practices in Community Colleges. With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation, the Center will conduct data analysis, hold focus groups with students and faculty members, and continue review of work underway in community colleges. This work will contribute significant new knowledge about promising practices and how they can promote student persistence and completion in community colleges.

To begin, the Center has identified 13 promising practices in community colleges—practices for which there is emerging evidence of success: from the extant research and from multiple colleges with multiple semesters of data showing improvement on an array of metrics, such as retention and course completion. Those practices are briefly described below.

Material is adapted from the Center's 2012 national report, A Matter of Degrees: Promising Practices for Community College Student Success.

Assessment and Placement

Completing developmental education requirements early is related to higher overall achievement, and students can't complete if they don't enroll. Research suggests that students who take developmental education courses during their first term are more likely to complete their developmental sequence than are students who do not attempt any developmental courses during their first term.*

Making sure that students take the right classes is a multistep process. Colleges should create opportunities for students to participate in review or brush-up experiences before placement tests to minimize the amount of remediation students need. Then, after students have been assessed, students who need remediation should be placed into developmental pathways where they will have a chance to succeed rather than multiple opportunities to fail.

Some colleges permit late registration because they do not want to turn interested students away. But colleges do not have to block the door to late registrants. Instead, they can offer options, such as late-start classes or intensive experiences for refreshing academic skills.


**Accelerated or Fast-Track Developmental Education**

The longer it takes a student to move through developmental education into a credit program, the more likely he or she is to drop out of college.*

Accelerated or fast-track developmental programs both enhance learning and engagement and help students move to college-level work more quickly. A growing number of colleges are designing accelerated or fast-track developmental education programs so students can focus on specific, targeted issues for remediation; move through developmental education at their own pace; and most important, move into college-level work more quickly.** Well-designed accelerated programs are efficient, and students in these intensive courses perform equally as well, or better than, students in traditional developmental education in terms of course completion, credit accumulation, and persistence.***


**First-Year Experience**

First-year experience programs create a small community within the larger campus for first-year students, helping them build relationships with other students as well as faculty and staff.
Attending class is a key element of succeeding in college, and emerging evidence indicates that class attendance policies have value. For example, researchers have found that students' class attendance is the best predictor of academic performance in college – it more reliably predicts college grades than do high school GPA, SAT scores and other standardized admissions tests, study habits, and study skills.*


Alert and Intervention

Early academic warning processes typically are triggered when faculty members identify students who are struggling and notify others in the college who step in to support the students. Colleges might follow up with students by e-mail, text, social media, or telephone and encourage them to access services, such as tutoring, peer mentoring, study groups, and student success skills workshops.

Some research suggests that when colleges make students aware of their academic difficulties and point students toward available support services students are more likely to successfully complete the course in question and to persist over the long term.*


Experiential Learning Beyond the Classroom

Experiential (hands-on) learning, such as internships, co-op experience, apprenticeships, field experience, clinical assignments, and community-based projects, has multiple benefits. It steepes students in content, and it encourages students to make connections and forge relationships that can support them in college and beyond.

Tutoring

Studies suggest that participation in tutoring is associated with higher GPAs and pass rates.* Tutoring also provides much-needed peer support and academic intervention for students who traditionally struggle with the transition to college life.**
