



# Maintaining a Focus on Student Success

A deep bench of leaders can help colleges sustain programs that improve outcomes



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hen Crystal Jones entered a new leadership development program that centers on encouraging student success three years ago, she had a good idea of what the term “diversity” meant. Or so she thought.

As she worked with other community college leaders from across Ohio in a program designed to help them better grasp the underpinnings of student success, her notions on equity began to morph into something deeper.

“The program heightened my awareness that diversity is about much more than race or ethnicity,” says Jones, who participated as an assistant dean at Clark State College, a two-year institution in southern Ohio. “Things like educational readiness and a student’s socioeconomic situation have to be factored in when we think about helping them succeed.”

For the past three years, Jones and more than 100 other mid-level administrators, faculty, and staff from Ohio’s 23 community colleges have benefitted from a year-long course in leadership that gets them working

in teams. As they do, they think about what it means to create an environment that nurtures student learning, work with outside partners to improve outcomes, and create stronger pathways to jobs and four-year institutions. The program aims to develop budding leaders who can convert those lessons into better-informed decisions, once they climb the rungs of the college hierarchy.

Created by the [Success Center for Ohio Community Colleges](#), an arm of the Ohio Association of Community Colleges (OACC), in 2019, and based on [the Aspen Institute's Leadership Academy for Student Success curriculum](#), aims to develop mid-level leaders who understand the ins and outs of improving student outcomes.

It is one of a handful of emerging efforts across the nation that focus on maintaining the momentum of student-centered programs by ensuring that leaders—everyone from college financial officers to presidents to board members—have a deep understanding of them and their importance.

At its core, the OACC's Leadership Academy is designed to tighten the ties between success and succession. By creating a pipeline of college officials who are fully capable of replacing departing senior leaders who once formed and championed student-success initiatives, the Leadership Academy aims to keep those programs on Page One of a college's agenda.

“The guided pathways model is not a one-year-and-done thing—it's a multi-year effort,” says Christopher Baldwin, a senior

fellow at the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement, a for-profit consultancy firm; Baldwin developed the academy's program. “There's a talent pipeline problem within higher education, especially at the community-college level, where there's a lot of turnover. And a lot of those institutions aren't prepared when a top person leaves. Too often, we see student success initiatives stall out.”

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The academy was formed after the OACC and its Student Success Center became concerned about low graduation rates “and a need to increase the return on investment for our students,” says Laura Rittner, executive director of the Success Center. The OACC has strengthened its approach to student success since then, particularly among students of color, low-income students, and others who are the first in their families to go to college.

But targeting certain student groups who can use the help is only one part of the equation. “The officers at our colleges were worried that they lacked a deep bench,” Rittner says. The Leadership Academy was designed to change that. Its alums report that the approach has value. Eight in 10 say that the academy has moderately or significantly increased their leadership capabilities.

While developing a cadre of rising administrators is one way to maintain programs that aim to improve student outcomes, one new initiative is focused on a higher-level group of college leaders: board members.

[A joint effort](#) by the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education and the Association of Governing Boards works with trustees of Kentucky's public colleges, as well as faculty councils, to increase their awareness of the need to emphasize student success.

The program's goal is to distribute success-oriented leadership abilities more widely across campus. Data shows that, nationally, every six years a college presidency changes, while provosts tend to turn over every four years.

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“Student success as a strategic goal cannot be a passion project for one leader,” says Henry Stoeber, president of the Association of Governing Boards (AGB). “It must be a long-term, institution-wide priority. Even after a president leaves, the governing board is there to carry the torch and ensure that successive presidents focus on strategic priorities such as better student outcomes.”

The effort is focused on Kentucky because of the high number of indigenous, low-

income, and rural students there who traditionally face challenges as they try to complete their education. Program leaders hope to hone the model and expand it around the state and region.

To help boards learn about the primacy of student success, AGB and the Gardner Institute have for the past two years encouraged board members at eight Kentucky colleges to ask targeted questions about what works, to pore over pertinent local and national datasets on student outcomes, and to explore why low graduation rates persist among some groups, such as federal grant recipients.

The program's goal isn't to prepare board members to micromanage success programs, but to make them aware of the need to value them when it comes time to hire college leaders or sign off on program funding. By getting board members working in teams with faculty members and cabinet-level administrators to develop more knowledge about student success, they will be better suited to maintain the momentum of existing success programs or foster new ones. Surveys show that people in those positions can lack perspective and understanding, adds Drew Koch, chief executive at the Gardner Institute.

At a time when colleges are struggling with enrollment and retention, student success must become a priority for board members who oversee the purse strings. “Generally, these are people who have fiduciary responsibility for these institutions, but they're not where they need to be yet,” says Koch.

That same kind of thinking applies to college chief financial officers. A new program put together by the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) aims to help those officers develop new strategies for converting campus dollars into student success. The effort was formed a year ago after research conducted at 54 institutions found that many had started equity-minded student success programs, but few had developed systems that fully incorporated them into their operating budgets.

“For a while now, we’ve noticed that a lot of student success efforts have proven to be unsustainable,” says Jim Hundrieser, vice president of consulting and business development at NACUBO. Many success-focused programs are too small, serving too few people who need help to move the needle on retention efforts. Meanwhile, student-success funding, usually in the form of grants, is managed by chief financial officers who are already challenged as enrollments at many institutions have declined.

“One of the key questions we’re asking is, how can we shift planning and budget processes so students are at the center of what we’re funding?” Hundrieser says.

As it works with 13 institutions around the nation, NACUBO will also try to develop best

practices for how to deal with leadership transitions. Chief financial officers are often the longest-tenured members of a college president’s cabinet. Yet, they are subject to the rapid turnover of presidents and provosts—and the changing academic and financial priorities that can come with them. Keeping people in the pipeline who understand the finances of student success is imperative.

“If we’re successful, there will be more leaders in place, either because they have stayed or moved up, who will understand and champion these student-success efforts,” Hundrieser says.

For her part, Crystal Jones has had the opportunity to champion student success from a higher perch. Now the vice president for marketing, diversity, and community impact at Clark State, Jones says additional training helped prepare her for the position.

The OACC program also connected her with a community of like-minded administrators with whom she can share data and ideas and where she can find a firm shoulder to lean on.

“Having that support means everything to me,” she adds. “This program has affected many more people than was originally intended. I’m just grateful for it.”

*Ascendium Education Group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, and students of color and veterans. Ascendium’s work identifies, validates, and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system, and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all. For more information, visit [ascendiumphilanthropy.org](http://ascendiumphilanthropy.org).*