Student-Success Leadership Teams

What are student-success leadership teams?

Historically, colleges have treated students' academic progress as a separate realm from their cocurricular and extracurricular lives. Formal administrative divisions reflected that view, with academic affairs siloed from other offices.

In recent years, colleges have come to better understand that academic performance is part of a delicate web. Academics are interwoven with students' mental and physical well-being, financial concerns, family situations and obligations, career and life goals, values, social skills, engagement in college life, and sense of belonging. Student-success leadership teams are high-level groups that try to coordinate a college's efforts so that every student's welfare is considered strategically and holistically. Hundreds of colleges – public and private, large and small, four-year and two-year – are already using them.

Why are these teams important?

Colleges are increasingly analyzing the fragility and complexity of students' needs. They are doing so not just for the welfare of their students but for the financial stability of the institutions themselves. In light of a demographic decline in the number of high-school graduates projected to start in 2026, colleges realized that increasing enrollment would become harder – and for many, impossible. That spurred them to focus more on student recruiting, persistence, and retention, with better graduation rates and levels of student satisfaction. Student success has also become more of an emphasis because many students now are the first in their family to go to college, are from low-income families, or are from underrepresented minority groups, and they often need expanded support. In addition, lawmakers and parents are pressuring colleges to produce graduates who can get good, well-paying jobs.

Ascendium Education Group is excited to support The Chronicle of Higher Education's initiative to prioritize student success. Over the next year, this partnership will produce special virtual events, focused reports and a new online resource center, where colleges can search and find creative solutions and useful content from The Chronicle's extensive archives of best practices.

Our support of this project promises a comprehensive look at new and innovative approaches to helping students achieve success. By collecting voices and perspectives from across higher education, The Chronicle's expert journalists can guide colleges to make actionable changes that will help close achievement gaps and fulfill the promise of socioeconomic mobility for all students.

Ascendium supports initiatives that seek to create large-scale change so more learners from low-income backgrounds can achieve their educational and career goals. We share with The Chronicle a passion and purpose to inform and empower higher education trustees, leaders, administrators and faculty members about the pressing issues facing students today. That includes shining a light on students of color and transfer students, as well as those who are the first in their family to attend college.

We believe in the power of education and training beyond high school to transform the lives of learners from low-income backgrounds. The COVID-19 health crisis has exacerbated well-documented opportunity gaps that put these learners at a disadvantage relative to their peers. This makes the solutions raised by this initiative all the more vital.

Thank you for your interest in this initiative. To learn more about Ascendium, please subscribe to our monthly newsletter.

Sincerely,

Amy Kerwin
Vice President – Education Philanthropy
Ascendium Education Group

The Covid-19 pandemic slammed enrollment even sooner than expected, making student-retention priorities even more urgent. In March 2020, changes that were on the drawing board or stuck in committee had to be put into practice in a matter of days or weeks.

To better serve their sometimes traumatized students and bolster their own chances of long-term institutional health – even survival – colleges were forced to accelerate increased cooperation and communication across administrative divisions. The student-success leadership teams have been crucial to those efforts.

Who is on these teams?

The teams vary in formal designation and administrative rank, but depending on the type and size of college, they generally include or report to cabinet-level leaders.

The teams usually include leaders of academic and student affairs as well as admissions and enrollment. They also frequently include, or at least consult with, the chief data officer and personnel from divisions like academic advising; residential life; financial aid; diversity, equity, and inclusion; disability services; career services; learning centers; information-technology offices; counseling and health services; athletic departments; peer-support programs; international-student advising; alumni affairs; and offices of spirituality and faith. At Lynn University, in Boca Raton, Fla., student-success leaders initially consulted with a group of 40 campus-change agents to help set student-success priorities.

What impact do the teams have?

If the teams are energetic and conscientious, their efforts have a broad impact not only on students' college years but before and after. Their work helps guide student-recruitment strategies and pre-admission engagement and orientation. At the University of Montana at Missoula, that's meant increasing efforts to visit high schools within or near American Indian reservations, helping potential applicants fill out financial-aid forms.

Student-success teams also help steer alumni networking and questionnaires about students' college experience, graduates' success, and plans for career and continuing education. That data is complemented by regular student surveys and frequent feedback from faculty and staff members. The faculty feedback is enabled by increasingly sophisticated interdepartmental software networks.

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The focus on student success arguably affects the job description of every college employee. That could be a professor concerned about a student's math background or a dining-hall or custodial staff member who notices that a student is isolated or showing signs of an eating disorder. Colleges talk about student success as an institutionwide responsibility.

In decades past, when rising enrollments were taken for granted, the campus attitude toward students was too often sink or swim. Now, ideally, all students should have a circle of faculty and staff members looking after them, in person and in data points. At Goucher College, in Baltimore, each first-year

student is assigned a student-success team that includes a success adviser, a first-year mentor, a residence coordinator, and a career adviser. If appropriate, that first-year student will also have on the team an athletic coach, an international-student adviser, and a network adviser with Launch, which is an additional support program for Pell Grant-eligible, first-generation, and other students from underrepresented groups.

Students should meet regularly with members of their colleges' support teams, and they should know who is on those teams and how to reach them. If all goes as it should, students have additional support from peers who are increasingly educated about mental-health challenges, wellness, and the prevention of sexual assault and suicide.

The idea is not to coddle or cocoon students but to try to keep their academic and personal goals from being derailed.

What are some student-success tools?

Student success is an umbrella term. It might require shipping a laptop overnight to a student. It might entail electronically transferring emergency funds for a student to pay rent.

In other cases, it might be a matter of providing flexible-learning platforms that were developed during Covid but serve colleges through other obstacles: a blizzard or smoke from a wildfire that makes it impossible to get to lecture halls, or a hurricane that knocks out power for a week. Making student success a priority might entail dropping negligible fees and fines that make little difference to a college's budget but keep students from enrolling, graduating, or securing transcripts for job or graduate-school applications.

Sometimes student success calls for pedagogical change – a pivot to more active learning, for instance, and so-called flipped classrooms. Sometimes it calls for curricular adjustments. A college might need to add a course in study habits for students who spent key high-school semesters Zoom-schooling, or it might need to rethink a grueling

introductory course with alarmingly high failure rates. A college might need to add classes about coronavirus and society or about racism and equity to help students gain some perspective on the social turmoil around them. Or it might need to schedule new summer or mid-semester courses that struggling students can switch to so that they don't lose academic momentum and drop out.

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While some of these student-success strategies are low cost, others require significant new financial investment and support. Federal relief funds helped colleges' emergency responses to the pandemic, but as those funds dry up, colleges are strategizing how to sustain wrap-around academic, financial, technical, and health support to students in need. Therefore, financial, budget, advancement, and alumni officers closely orbit student-success planning and analysis.

How can teams create new networks?

Student-success efforts, heavily influenced and assisted by consultants and ed-tech companies, are an intriguing blend of old-school personal outreach and data-driven policy decisions. The student-success leadership team is often the engine that generates and helps maintain those networks.

On the personal side, during the pandemic, the jobs of student-affairs and residential-life staff members were disrupted. At some institutions, like Biola University, in La Mirada, Calif., those personnel were tasked instead with proactive outreach and coaching to dispersed students at home to check on their physical and mental health, internet needs, family finances, and other concerns. Colleagues in financial aid, information technology, counseling, advising, and other offices then followed up. To thrive through enrollment and other challenges, colleges will need to maintain that kind of individualized attention.

Because of the pandemic and policy shifts, colleges have fewer incoming students' standardized-test scores and thinner folders on sport and club experiences. But admissions officers have tried to get to know these students through knowledge of their GPAs and school districts, and through conversations with them about their dreams, passions, and fears.

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Traditionally, academic advisers would try to help floundering students, especially during the first year, without necessarily knowing much about those students' backgrounds. Now those advisers sometimes huddle with admissions personnel to get a better feel for what students have been through and what help they might need. Even if college life reaches a post-pandemic normality, cooperation like that will remain a plus.

On the data side, colleges are looking out especially for certain types of students who may need more support, including those who are from low-income, first-generation, or underrepresented minority populations, as well as those who have transferred from other colleges, are LGBTQ, have emotional or learning disabilities, or have inadequate academic preparation. Information from enrollment and admissions personnel provides a heads-up, through networks established by the student-success leadership team, to colleagues in other divisions.

How should teams coordinate crisis intervention?

In the bad old days, a student flunking midterm exams and papers might get a stern talking to. Worse still, they might not, and it wouldn't be until a semester was wasted that the problem would be officially acknowledged.

Now, if a college only notices that a student is doing poorly at midterms, that is considered an administrative failure. Close monitoring of students is expected throughout the term.

That monitoring requires faculty members to be conscientious about sending colleagues early alerts regarding academic crises as well as monitoring signs of students' mental, physical, or social problems. Some faculty members object to this added aspect to their already difficult job description. Department chairs, deans, and provosts respond that if this model adds some burdens to a professor's job, it alleviates others. That's because the emphasis is on referral.

A professor is expected to let colleagues know if a student needs academic or other kinds of help, but that professor is not expected to be a therapist, social worker, nutritionist, or IT help desk. Faculty members should have clear training, guidelines, and tools for making those referrals. An effective student-success leadership team will coordinate that.

If admissions and enrollment offices can help inform colleagues what to expect of incoming students, the reverse is also true. Data about the performance of current students should be looped back to admissions offices.

Are professors seeing more incoming students with reading-comprehension or attention problems? Are student-affairs teams seeing more students who are homesick or who have substance-abuse issues? Admissions and enrollment officers need to know that. They might discuss it with administrators of feeder schools, change what is included in summer preparatory programs and orientation materials, or use it to inform interdepartmental decisions about counseling-center staffing and teletherapy and crisis-line needs.

Once more, making sure the right information is routed to the right people is ultimately the job of the student-success leadership team, the nerve center protecting students' futures. If your college doesn't have one, it probably should.

"Student-Success Leadership Teams" was produced by Chronicle Intelligence. Please contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.

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