

What We Believe About Student Success

Chancellor's Ad Hoc Committee on Student Success

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1. We believe, in the context of a community college, student success means that students achieve their individual goals as participants in the college community.

Commentary: Students enroll in a community college for a vast array of reasons. For some, their goal is graduation with an associate's degree or certificate. However, if we operate on the assumption that graduation is the goal of all, or even most, of our students, we will mistakenly label as failures a large number of students who are completely satisfied that their experience with us has been a success. These students take classes at a community college to accumulate a few credits to transfer to another college or university, to improve specific skills for the workplace and/or to enhance their knowledge/skills for personal enrichment. All efforts to understand, measure and promote student success must respect and honor this array of goals. Furthermore, students do not necessarily commit themselves to one college for all their classes. Many swirl through several colleges gathering the credits they need from each. It must be considered that, although a student may not complete his or her goals at a given college, that college has still made a meaningful contribution to student success.

2. We believe the community college plays a vital role in assisting and guiding students in setting goals that are realistic and attainable and yet challenge the students to achieve their full potential.

Commentary: Many community college students begin with no clear goal in mind at all. Others come with goals that are unrealistic or, at the least, fail to acknowledge that a great deal of background work will be needed before the goals can be achieved. Still others, often first generation students, are unaware of the many possibilities open to them and set goals that are lower than their full potential. For all of these students, clarifying realistic and attainable goals is itself the first milestone of success. The college community, through advising and counseling and the mentoring of faculty, plays an essential role in helping students to articulate these goals.

3. We believe successful community college students operate on time lines that do not match traditional expectations, and that understanding student success should include recognition of completion of specific short term steps on the path to long term goals.

Commentary: Most measures of success that are applied to higher education put a time line for success at 1.5 to 2 times the traditional expectations. For example, graduation rates for bachelors degrees are often measured within a 6-year time frame. Community college students, as distinct from students at four-year institutions, are more often balancing work, school and family obligations and these situations require them to move

at a slower pace—which in fact actually improves their probability of achieving their ultimate goals. In addition, some community college students begin with a profound need of remediation, so that more than one semester may be needed to pass a single class—and this initial time must be added to the arc of these students’ journey towards graduation, transfer or other goals. Advisors and faculty play a key role in helping students set realistic short term goals that take these factors under consideration and that will help students stay on track towards achieving their long term goals.

4. We believe student success requires a healthy partnership between administrators, support services, faculty and students, each taking responsibility for their respective roles.

Commentary: A college that states that it is committed to student success is obligated to provide the highest quality of instruction possible (at both the college level and the developmental level) and robust support services. Highly qualified, innovative and dedicated faculty have a profound impact on students’ futures. Effective advising, counseling, tutoring, mentoring, financial aid, student activities and other support services each play an important part in positioning students to maximize their performance. Administrators provide the resources and environment for faculty and staff to perform their roles effectively. However, it must also be understood that the ultimate responsibility for learning resides with the learner. Students can only learn successfully if they actively respond and persistently engage in the requisite activities prescribed by faculty, staff and administration. They must develop effective study habits, implement strategies to meet course outcomes, utilize support services as needed, and update/revise goals along the path to completion – all within the framework of regular, timely contacts with the college advisor(s). The college plays an important role in helping students develop these behaviors. However, any attempt to understand, measure and promote student success should take into consideration that some students will choose not to engage.

5. We believe student success is maximized when students are challenged to achieve high standards of excellence.

Commentary: In helping students understand how to set and achieve goals, one of the assumptions that the college community needs to try to help students put aside is the notion that just getting by is good enough. Whether students plan to transfer to a four year school, to enter the workforce directly or to pursue other endeavors, the college must prepare them for a very competitive world in which the best prepared have the best chance of success. Therefore, our standards for students should be high. But, historically, efforts to measure student success have, in some places, had the unintended consequence of compromising these standards. For example, in situations where grade distributions or test scores have been used as the measure of success, faculty have sometimes felt pressure to lower expectations to inflate scores. The college can avoid

this effect by clearly and consistently articulating its support for high expectations and by choosing a broad array of measures that focus on all aspects of student success.

6. We believe student success is the core mission of the Lone Star College System. It is vital to the achievement of this mission to gather data to research our effectiveness and to learn from the data we find. As our students are diverse in their goals and experiences, an array of new measures will be required to address this diversity.

Commentary: The most commonly used measures of student success, grade distributions and graduation rates, are useful but do not capture all the aspects of student success. The “momentum points” proposed by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, including pass rates in developmental and first college level Math and English classes, completion of 15 or 30 hours as well as graduation rates, go farther but focus student success on only two disciplines and still fail to capture the diversity of students’ goals. Additional data exists and new measures should be implemented including a careful documentation of students’ individual goals and their achievement thereof.