



STUDENTS

Measuring, Addressing Student Behaviors Help Raise Completion Rates

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Community colleges have been at center stage in higher education's movement to increase retention and graduation rates for students, especially among minority populations. Never in the history of these institutions have so many stakeholders agreed to this common goal. Never have so many foundations contributed so many



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funds to support the goal, and never has there been so much research to help colleges reach the goal.

Yet increasing retention and graduation rates remains elusive. The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center indicates that nationwide only 8 percent of community

college students earn a certificate in six years, and only 14 percent earn an associate's degree in six years. Fourteen percent of community college students do not earn a single credit in their first term, and almost 50 percent of students drop out by the second year. Yet community colleges are the institutions that serve over half of the nation's Black and Hispanic college students.

How can institutions make more progress? One way is to evaluate and identify students' behaviors that lead to their success — and help students bolster those behaviors and skills that will help more of them succeed in college.

We can now assess students' preparedness for college based not only on traditional means such as placement tests or even high school transcripts, but also by measuring whether their behaviors and experiences make them ready to succeed.

Recent research shows the potential of identifying the student behaviors and attitudes that are key to improving college completion. Over the years, researchers have referred to these intangible skills by various definitions: non-cognitive factors, psychosocial skills, grit, character and even hope.

Successful college students have to manage their schedule and schoolwork on their own, maybe for the first time. They need to understand what's expected of them. They need to know how to find support. They must be committed to attaining a degree or certificate and feel assured that it's worth their time and tuition. These factors are especially important now for the many first-generation students who enter community college.

Research published in *Psychological Bulletin*® in 2004, 2009 and 2012 indicates that students with strong academic study skills, commitment to academic goals, personal time management and social support are much more likely to complete their degrees.

In fact, such measures may tell us even more about which students will struggle to complete college than traditional assessments of academic ability.

A 2004 meta-analysis looked at a wide range of students from two- and four-year institutions. It considered standardized test scores, high school GPAs, students' behaviors, and their relation to both grades and retention through the first year of college. As it turned out, high college-placement test scores were strong predictors of students' college GPAs.

The same study also found that students' behaviors were much more accurate predictors of which students actually persisted in college than their standardized



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test scores. Having specific academic goals, commitment to an institution and social support systems were far more predictive of success than tests alone. For example, we have found that students who had low math skills, but high effort (persistence, work ethic, consistency) had an 86 percent likelihood of succeeding.

That isn't to say academic achievement isn't important. But identifying and addressing gaps in behavioral skills can help identify students who are less likely to finish college. Instead of getting lost in remedial courses, students with low test scores who show strong motivation may benefit from taking regular courses with supplemental instruction.

We're not suggesting any type of high-stakes test, but rather tools that asks students about how they organize their time, what they value in a college degree, and how they cope with stress, challenges and financial or family pressures. With this information, institutions can better identify help for at-risk students and provide resources that can help change and improve these behaviors that are so important to success.

There are already examples of institutions taking the next step. Many two- and four-year colleges across the country are looking at the value of measuring behavioral skills such as a student's academic skills, commitment, self-management and access to social support.

Although, measuring behavioral skills can only go as far as the follow up institutions provide to students for charting a clearer path to success. After identifying the strengths and weaknesses with students, using an action plan allows institutions to capitalize on a student's talents and provide the right support for their weaknesses. For example, a student who reports struggling with procrastination and organization can be directed to set up an appointment at an on-campus student resource center.

These types of innovations will help institutions better serve their students and will assist students in finding the right formula for success. As intangible as they sound, behaviors, attitudes and grit aren't innate. They can change and improve — and, with them, students' likelihood of finishing a degree.

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