

point of view

Picking the Low-Hanging Fruit

Educators are fond of using the reference “picking the low-hanging fruit.” By this they usually mean that when changes are made, we should begin by addressing the easily achievable, more obvious, and often less costly problems and issues. The fruit at the top of the tree is harder to reach and, in the context of making change, harder to deal with when reached.

The Completion Agenda—to double the number of students by 2020 who complete a certificate, associate degree, or who transfer—has become the overarching mission of the contemporary community college and presents formidable challenges to community college leaders. Hundreds of community colleges are deeply engaged in new strategic plans to significantly transform their institutions to meet the goals of the Completion Agenda. Most leaders understand clearly that they must create ladders so they can pick the fruit in the highest branches of the tree if substantive change is to take place. But, in some cases, leaders are overlooking the low-hanging fruit that if plucked could boost their student success rates enormously, and at little or no cost. In this column, we address three kinds of low-hanging fruit: the admissions application, signage, and late registration.

The Admissions Application

The first contacts and experiences a potential community college student has with the college are the most significant; this is especially true for first-generation, underprepared students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds. Even the slightest negative experience will send many of these students running for the exit. Community college faculty and staff have become increasingly aware of the challenges these students face and have created more wel-



come environments and more accessible services to help students make a solid and productive connection to the college. Often overlooked in this realignment, however, is the college admissions form that may not have been updated for decades.

One statewide admissions form, in a leading community college state, is an example of the kind of barrier that can be embedded in a key early experience required of every student. The first sentence on the “Application for Admission” form is boxed for emphasis and states “Please Note: In compliance with the Sex Offender and Crimes Against Minors Registry, a portion of this information will be submitted to the...State Police.”

This not exactly the most welcoming message the college can send to a new student, especially as the first sentence in the document. At the bottom of page 2 of the form there is another statement that requires a signature “I certify under penalty of disciplinary action that all of the information is complete and accurate.”

A Domicile Determination Form is

attached as page 3 of the Application for Admission, and the student is required to sign his or her name to the last few sentences: “Please note: If you knowingly provide erroneous information to evade payment of out-of-state tuition and fees, you will be charged out-of-state tuition and fees for each term attended and may be subject to dismissal. Random audits of this information will be performed. I certify under penalty of disciplinary action that all of the information is complete and accurate.”

Colleges must, of course, protect themselves in the legal situations addressed in these statements, but does the very first statement have to be one of these statements; and is it necessary to scatter three such statements throughout the form? It appears there were too many lawyers on the committee that created the form. It may be possible to organize the elements of the form so that these legal references are collected in one place. And it may be possible to soften the language or the context of the statements to make them appear less threatening. The admissions form should be designed as part of the welcoming culture community colleges are trying to create to make students feel more welcome and acceptable in what for many is a formidable transition.

In addition to these threatening statements this particular statewide form also includes some language that could be confusing for new students. On pages 1 and 2 all references to where the student lives are designated as “residence;” on page 3 the language changes to “domicile” to designate where the student lives. And some students may not know the difference between the options “I plan to pursue a degree, certificate, or diploma from my community

college.” The cover page on the Application for Admission also references a number of college services and programs that may be new terms for students: placement testing, developmental courses, freshman orientation, registration, and academic advisor.

The language of college is clearly understood by the natives who work there, but it is sometimes a foreign language to many of the new students who come as immigrants to this new culture. It is important to acculturate these students to the new culture and the new language, but the first connections—such as the admissions form—need to be understood by students sufficiently well to ensure they stick around long enough to learn the language and the culture of the college

Signage

I have consulted in more than 800 community colleges, and when I am driving to a new campus I almost always experience challenges with finding my way around the campus. I have learned to look for the flag pole because that is usually the administrative building where the president is located. The signage designed to direct me to locations is seldom helpful; for new students the signage can be very confusing.

Last year I visited two campuses and became totally lost. On one campus the names of the buildings were posted on a four-foot vertical column in front of the building. I had to stop the car and twist my head sideways to read the signage. The buildings and this signage were aesthetically pleasing as I am sure the architect intended in the design; but the architect had violated an essential principle of architecture in that form did not follow function. The purpose of signage is to provide clear and accessible directions; in this case, design trumped practicality.

On another campus I could not see any of the building signs driving through the campus and had to eventually park a good distance from what I thought might be the Student Service building where I was to meet with my contact. When I got closer to the building I discovered that the building sign

was on a wall facing a walkway rather than the street—and it was partially hidden from view by an architectural overhang. Again the building and the signage were attractive, but practicality and usefulness lost out again to design.

Many campuses lack a building directory at the key entrances to campus. And sometimes where directories are provided they are too small to be seen from a car. Often, when the directory could be useful the names or numbers of buildings are confusing. There is often no consistency or rationale for naming or numbering buildings; colleges often mix the use of names and numbers making it even more difficult for new students and campus visitors.

Part of the problem for community colleges in creating helpful signage is that most colleges have grown rapidly—adding new buildings, refurbishing existing buildings, relying on temporary buildings, extending parking lots—with the assistance of different architectural firms and different presidents and different directors of buildings and grounds, all with different ideas of aesthetics and usefulness.

When new students eventually locate the buildings they need to enter, the signage inside the building can become a more challenging barrier. In their book *Students Speak: Are We Listening?* Kay McClenney and Arleen Arnsparger cite the experiences of several students trying to find their way:

This college is like an airport in a foreign country. There are a whole lot of people rushing around, looking as though they know where they are going.

But even when I see signs telling me where to go, they're written in a language I don't understand.

I actually had no idea what to do to be honest. It was very confusing. I got lost very easily. Even though I had a map—the buildings didn't have room numbers, and there were like three floors to each building.

As faculty and staff we sometimes forget our first experiences in college. After many years walking the halls of academe we pretty much understand the culture of college and we know our way around; if

not, we know who to ask to help us navigate the labyrinths. New college students—especially those who are first generation, underprepared students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—are often lost and confused in their first foray into college. Most often they have not lived in families where parents and siblings are familiar with the language of college. The signs that point the way to the registrar's office may mean nothing to a student who does not know what a registrar is.

Making sure signage is really helpful to students is another opportunity to pick the low-hanging fruit. Directories and maps should be plentiful and accessible. Signs outside and inside buildings should be consistent and visible. Colleges should create their own apps with GPS to help guide students and make these technological guides readily available from the first contact with the college. Colleges need to make the “front door” of the college clearly visible. Creative and helpful colleges have called on student and faculty volunteers to meet students in the parking lots and in strategic locations—often with brightly-colored T shirts—to welcome and direct new students the first few days of registration and class. Footstep decals have been placed on the grounds and on the floors of buildings to help guide students to important offices. Special large signs have been constructed to make even clearer to students the locations and the processes important for the first few days. Diminishing the frustration and anxiety of students new to college by using signage that is visible and makes sense is another important step in creating a college climate that is welcoming and which is likely to lead to improved student success.

Late Registration

Late registration is also low-hanging fruit that has been defended for many years by advocates who see it as a key component of the access agenda — a college policy that keeps the door open for students as long as a week after classes begin. Other

advocates make the case that by extending the deadline for late registration the college will increase its FTE or ADA which translates into increased revenue for the college.

Many more advocates, however, favor terminating late registration. When I recommend doing away with late registration in countless speeches to faculty groups across the country, it is the statement that always guarantees the most applause. For decades, in his writing and in his speeches, John Roueche has asked two key questions: "What is the most important day of the semester?" Faculty always answer in unison "The first day." Then he asks: "What is the most important week of the semester?" And faculty respond in unison, "The first week." Faculty members are almost unanimous in their view that late registration does more harm than good.

The first day and the first week of classroom instruction are significant because this is often the only times that the students who are most at-risk can become engaged and make the connections that encourage persistence and success. All students—but especially first-generation, underprepared students from lower socio-economic backgrounds—need to make connections with other students, with the instructor and with the content of the course as quickly as possible. When students are allowed to swirl in and out of classes for an entire week the conditions for connection and engagement are severely limited. The message conveyed by this practice about the importance the college places on instruction is not lost on faculty—or on students. John and Suanne Roueche said in 1993, "A late registration policy indicates to the student that beginning class late is of no consequence,

and they will miss little or nothing by being absent when the class begins."

Many colleges have begun to terminate the practice of late registration. Several have experienced a slight dip in enrollment, but when colleges planned carefully for the change by preparing students and faculty who will be affected, the stakeholders adapted easily and experienced no loss in enrollment and subsequently in state aid. These colleges also addressed the issue of keeping the door open by providing for short-term and accelerated courses of various duration, beginning at various times after the first week of class. Students who do not register on time can sign up for these alternative courses.

Conclusion

As community colleges gear up to implement new policies, programs, and practices to ensure they are meeting the goals of the Completion Agenda, they can pick the low-hanging fruit now by making sure their admissions form is not a barrier, by providing signage that is clearly visible and helpful in directing students, and by terminating late registration. With practice in picking the low-hanging fruit, colleges can then turn to other low-hanging fruit on the tree including college websites, phone systems, course numbering systems, financial aid, and college catalogs. These are the easy barriers that every college should make a priority to examine and change if necessary. These changes will be much easier than harvesting the fruit clustered in the tops of the trees. Even if colleges do not plan to embrace the Completion Agenda their students and faculty will greatly bene-

fit in these changes that support students and faculty in their efforts to successfully navigate the educational enterprise.

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