Underserved Student Success in High Impact Practices: A New Model of Retention Leadership

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Introduction: A Transformative Process

As a result of adopting an inclusive excellence framework across campus, faculty, staff and students are asking new questions, challenging assumptions and exploring new pathways to support underserved student success, especially among students of color. At the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, to consider questions about retention at the campus level requires new approaches for leadership for retention. The university recognizes that the complex phenomena of retention are embedded in many competing forces in higher education today, such as changing demographics, competition, and challenges to access and affordability. Accountability for these new approaches entails the proper alignment of data collection to campus initiatives, and widespread collaboration. New leadership for retention requires that we go beyond the traditional measures of GPA, persistence and graduation rates. Questions about underserved student success compel campuses to seek ways to identify, understand and support a more systematic student success pathway.

By adopting more systematic approaches to student success, universities will require new leadership models such as those described by Lipman-Blumen (as cited in Kezar, 2009, p.5) that emphasize interdependence, awareness of cultural and social differences and adaptability. New approaches emerging at UW Oshkosh include college-wide dialogues, student panels, and course-based inquiries focusing on student participation and performance. These reports and new collaborations about student retention are evidence of a change in retention leadership worthy of consideration for other universities. Through the work on the Give Students a Compass project, the WI Transfer Equity Project\(^1\), and the Equity Scorecard\(^2\) work, leadership for retention evolved from isolated programs to a collaborative and collective process. Representatives from administration, academic support services, advising, student affairs, institutional research and enrollment management are coming together to collaborate, to share their stories and to set goals based on findings that describe distinct student success pathways.

The process of considering new models of retention leadership is transformative for a university campus; working groups share and explore specific data about student performance, and new teams of campus personnel work together to respond toward a common end: success for all students. Drawing upon the work of DePree, Kezar and Palmer (as cited in Kezar, 2009, p. 6), organizational learning flourishes when we highlight leadership practices that emphasize empowerment, context, reflexivity, cross-cultural understanding, complexity and social responsibility. Universities are encouraged to take into account the influence of perceptions, interpretations, context, culture, subjective experiences and the process of meaning-making for both the students and the entire university. At the campus level, this is manifested in new teams coming together, with networks and new groups forming to look at common issues with new


\(^2\)The Equity Scorecard Process, Center for Urban Education, University of Southern California. [http://cue.usc.edu](http://cue.usc.edu)
lens. Leadership for retention is best practiced when it is a process of shared power and mutual influence. Collecting data to tell the story about campus initiatives reshapes reporting practices and opens up a dialogue about student learning that involves the students themselves, faculty, staff and administration. To build a shared understanding, it was essential to get everyone on the same page and lay a foundation for a shared vision for student success. The inquiry model drives this collaboration and shared meaning-making.

**Inquiry Model Approach**

The overall aim at UW Oshkosh is to create a campus environment in which students of all backgrounds thrive and are successful. This involves broadening campus engagement to ensure that all students succeed. In order to do this we have to ask, “how do we serve our students?” and “how can we serve them in more equitable ways?” At UW Oshkosh, we use the inclusive excellence framework to examine our student achievement, our policies and practices to see if we can increase our representational equity and close the achievement gap among underserved students including minority, first generation, transfer and Pell eligible students. With this as the framework, the university elected to keep data to represent the underserved populations and to alter data collection practices in order to measure better the effectiveness of the various university retention initiatives. The university looked beyond traditional measures of student success to seek interrelationships among retention and other factors influencing student learning, ultimately seeking to isolate the roles of select support practices. Campus initiatives examined in this project included the Titan Advantage program (bridge program), Early Alert, performance in gateway courses, First Year Experience, a Writing Based Inquiry Studies course, a residential learning community, Study Abroad, Supplemental Instruction, and tutoring.

The university adopted an inquiry model approach to study the effectiveness of retention initiatives. Essentially, the inquiry model requires that the campus collect data based on relevant questions for data selection, collection and analysis. In doing so, the university is able to address critical questions about campus initiatives through the alignment of data collection and reporting. The university initiated its own principles of inquiry to strengthen its use of data to report on campus initiatives. First, the areas of inquiry must be tied to the campus initiatives and, specifically, to the task of identifying what information is needed to describe the effectiveness of such initiatives dealing with retention. Data analysis is aligned with the inquiry questions. Second, the inquiry questions must allow for collaboration and provide new, relevant data of interest to key audiences. Third, data reporting must include a much broader audience such as the initiative leaders, campus governance groups including the students, academic support and student support services.

To serve the principles of the inquiry model, the university created the Oshkosh Student Achievement Report (OSAR). The data in the report demonstrate the university’s institutional priorities regarding student success. The report promotes a shared responsibility for student success and demonstrates the importance of equity, the fact that different students require different types of support. The OSAR supports the assumption that leadership is a collaborative process focused on empowerment of various campus constituencies through inviting inquiry, sharing data and giving freedom to campus groups to go beyond traditional methods of data collection and reporting. Questions of equity, excellence and inclusivity require new methods, interpretations and dialogues. The data in the OSAR report provide information for the university
to examine its policies and practices for equity and excellence. OSAR provides the impetus for organizational learning through inquiry by asking the big questions about student success, interrelationships among initiatives and the exploration of student experiences. This is the retention leadership approach that emerged as a result of our participation in the Give Students a Compass project, the Equity Scorecard and WI Transfer Equity Study. The university’s inquiry model requires consistent reflection, data analysis and rethinking of institutional priorities to create new pathways to student success.

**Acting on the Data**

The Oshkosh Student Achievement Report (OSAR) provides disaggregated data about underserved students in terms of several performance measures. This report is shared with faculty, academic learning support staff and administrators both to inform them and to influence their planning. The following are examples of how the university has acted upon these data to ameliorate inequities in student success, or to change practices and programs to support more equitable learning experiences for our students.

*University Honors Program*

As participants in the Compass Project the university examined representational equity in several high impact practices on campus. Data indicated a pattern of inequity in the low numbers of students of color and transfer students who participate in the University Honors Program (UHP). In 2009-2010, only 4% of the participants in the UHP were students of color compared to 8% in the total student population. Only 8% of participants in the UHP were transfer students whereas the transfer student make up of the entire campus body is around 40%. The Compass team, assisted by the Director of the Honors Program, examined practices and policies regarding the program and their impact on underserved students, especially transfer students. As a result, with the support of the Provost, the program created a new pathway for transfer students to enter the program, thus expanding the number and diversity of the participants in the UHP. Future research by the program and the Office of Institutional Research will continue to track growth of underserved students in this program leading to a comparison of academic performance with peers not participating in the program. New collaborations among the recruitment, admissions and advising offices are exploring new ways to increase access and promote representational equity among underserved students in this program. The figure below represents how the university collected data on underserved students in the University Honors Program.
Underserved Students in the University Honors Program

A second example of how the lens of inclusive excellence assisted us to examine equity and excellence is the analysis of the influence of another high impact practice, the living-learning community, on academic performance for students of color. The university focused on the residential learning community called the NBC Village. NBC comes from the names of the residences involved. Our Compass group, in collaboration with Director, looked at academic performance of underserved students in a HIP living community and how they are doing compared to peers not in this HIP. Overall, the first semester GPA of NBC Village students is better than non-participant peers when disaggregated by race, first generation and Pell eligibility. We identified a GPA of 2.0 as a leading indicator of students’ success at the university and we based our analysis of data on this indicator. Discussions based on these data resulted in establishing mentor groups for Hispanic, SE Asian and African American students. Additionally, these groups received invitations to visit academic support services at the Center for Academic Research. A follow-up to the Early Alert program that focuses on these population groups is being piloted based on course grades and probation rates. Future research will look at underserved students and the interrelationship of other high impact practices on GPA and overall retention of living community.

Underserved Student Performance in a Residential Living Community

Performance Based on Participation in a Residential Learning Community

The university continues to use the data collection processes and analyses modeled by its participation in the Equity Scorecard to look for other inequities in student success. Specifically, the university tracks the frequency of grades of D, F or W in gateway or 100/200 level courses and the Office of Institutional Research disaggregates those data by ethnicity. The Center for Academic Resources uses the data to identify sections for academic support for Supplemental Instruction and the Equity Scorecard Project
Instruction and tutoring supported by a Differential Tuition model. Faculty and other campus-wide academic learning support offices review these data. Academic support services such as the Reading and Study Skills Center, the Writing Center, the Center for Academic Support and Diversity, the English Language Learning program and the Center for Academic Resources are in the process of creating action plans to respond to these data. A Closing the Achievement Gap grant from UW System allows the university to increase tutor training as well as the number of Supplemental Instruction opportunities for gateway courses, and we will be intentional about giving access to underserved students in these sessions. At the same time, a campus dialogue is underway to examine patterns of inequity in gateway courses facilitated by administrators and the faculty and instructional academic staff in the College of Letters and Science. Faculty who teach the gateway courses have been meeting to discuss performance equity and have a coordinated action plan for the coming academic year.

Supplemental Instruction Course Grade Data

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Example Class</th>
<th>Early Alerts</th>
<th>CAR</th>
<th>CAR once</th>
<th>CAR twice or more</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>dfw</td>
<td>% dfw</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>001C</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>002C</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>003C</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>191C</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301C</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data show that grade improvements occur along the range of attendances, suggesting a solid correlation between attendance at SI sessions and performance. Students not attending SI sessions have a course grade at least one letter grade lower than students who do participate in SI for at least 10 review sessions.

Conclusion

These are a few examples to show how using the framework of inclusive excellence and an inquiry model has informed the university dialogue, data collection and reporting to promote equity and excellence among underserved students.

Here is a list of topics that are worthy of consideration at the campus level for those interested in examining representational equity and underserved student success more closely.

1. Link the inquiry questions to the effectiveness of university retention initiatives.
2. Consider the systematic improvement of student success
3. Communicate Data - How well are we doing at telling our student learning story?
4. Consider new ways to deliver our services based on population needs
5. Connect with existing networks, services, offices
6. Communicate our Shared Outcomes
7. Integrate student success in planning
The university continues to move toward a more systematic approach to equity, excellence, and student success through promoting a culture of inquiry that probes beyond traditional measures and allows action teams to look at root causes, motivations, and underlying issues about participation and performance in high-impact practices. Inquiry around shared expectations for student learning and access to high-impact practices supports continuous improvement and promotes transformative practices across campus.


Idid. p. 6