

Incoming Lehman College President on Improving Student Success

By Don Sutherland

In six of its seven new accreditation Standards, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) explicitly references students. In additions, Standards III, IV, and V are largely concerned with the student learning experience, student support, and educational effectiveness assessment. When the new standards are compared with the outgoing ones, MSCHE has delivered a clear message that student success carries greater weight.

Considering the growing importance of student outcomes, it makes sense to have a look at incoming Lehman College President José Cruz's positions on student success. In his role as Vice President for Higher Education Policy and Practice at The Education Trust, he co-authored an insightful piece entitled, "Why Colleges Should Own the Effort to Improve Student Success," that was published in the September/October 2012 edition of *Change*. Some categorized excerpts:

Importance of Higher Education:

What we in higher education do...matters a lot to individuals and their ability to contribute to our country's future. And given the current levels of economic inequality and the demographic shifts we are experiencing, we cannot preserve our democratic ideals without closing the educational attainment gaps that separate low-income students and students of color from their peers. (p.49)

Emphasis on Cost Reduction vs. Student Learning:

...we are dubious that the language of "productivity," with its emphasis on cost reduction over student learning, will inspire the efforts of college faculty and staff, who must execute improvements on the front lines in order for us to reach our collective attainment goal. (p.50)

The Possibility of Significant Improvements in Student Success:

While some institutions remain stuck at the bottom of their institutional peer groups, others have made large improvements in just a few years for all students and especially for their underrepresented minority students. (p.50)

An Example from San Diego State University:

From 2005 to 2010, San Diego State cut its graduation-rate gap for underrepresented minority freshmen by more than half, from 19 to 8 percentage points. Graduation rates increased for all students during this time but rose an impressive 22 points for minority students. Among transfer students, SDSU posted double-digit increases in minority graduation rates while cutting the gap nearly in half. (p.50)

The Role of Leadership:

As we dig deeper into the research and into practices at...fast-improving colleges, we have come to understand that it's not about programs or about practices per se but about a set of five necessary conditions for transforming best practice into better practitioners.

First, successful institutions tend to have long-term, visible leaders who communicate a clear set of goals and build coalitions to achieve them... second, leaders at successful institutions work within institutional rhythms and structures, especially those related to shared governance... Third, leaders at successful institutions honor and tap their institution's culture to privilege student success... Fourth, leaders at successful institution use data to engage faculty and staff as partners in raising student achievement... Fifth, leaders at successful institutions recognize that efforts to improve student success are not solely the purview of student affairs. (p.51)

The full citation for the article is:

José L. Cruz and Kati Haycock, "Occupy Higher Education: Why Colleges Should Own the Effort to Improve Student Success," *Change*, September/October 2012.