

Higher Education Reform

▶ Next-generation models to increase success and control costs

As states seek to significantly increase college completion rates in a time of declining public resources, the fear is that the traditional model of higher education is no longer affordable or appropriate for the increasingly diverse marketplace of students who seek a college credential to improve their prospects in an increasingly competitive job market. Consequently, policymakers are examining different models that reduce the time students require to earn a degree.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* will look at recent research in the areas of assessing student learning, the use of technology in instruction, and models for providing the academic and social support students need to stay on track and earn a postsecondary credential.

Questions to be examined include:

- ▶ Are there ways to accelerate degree completion by assessing and awarding credit for the knowledge students bring to higher education?
- ▶ Does online education positively or negatively impact student success?
- ▶ How can institutions innovatively provide just-in-time supports that keep students on track and reduce their time to degree?

What's Inside

- ▶ Giving students credit for what they already know
- ▶ Should states invest in more online learning?
- ▶ Using data and technology to provide a personal touch to a student's experience



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Granting College Credit for Prior Learning

Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes

(The Council for Adult & Experiential Learning, CAEL, March, 2010.)

Many non-traditional students entering postsecondary education bring two things with them: 1) previous knowledge acquired from the workplace, military, non-credit training programs, etc. and 2) the desire to complete their program as quickly as possible. As a result, there is a movement to develop new systems for assessing prior learning of entering students and to provide college credit for that demonstrated knowledge. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's study of prior learning assessments suggests that identifying prior student knowledge more effectively can increase college completion without sacrificing quality.

The CAEL study examined student records for over 62,000 adult students age 25 and older who matriculated in 2001-02 at one of 48 postsecondary institutions. It compared the educational outcomes of students who had taken a prior learning assessment against those who did not take an exam as a means of earning a college credential. The study found:

- ▶ 56% of students who took a prior learning assessment (PLA) graduated within seven years, compared to only 21% of non-PLA students.
- ▶ For those students who took a prior learning assessment, 43% were awarded bachelor's degrees and 13% associate degrees.
- ▶ Students who earned between 13 and 24 credits through the PLA decreased their time to degree by over six months, and those who earned over 49 credits through PLA earned their credential on average 10 months sooner.

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Measuring Effectiveness of Online Learning

Many policymakers and postsecondary leaders believe that online or distance education is a cost-effective way to deliver postsecondary education. While the jury is still out on whether online education can be delivered more inexpensively than traditional courses, there is increasing evidence about its effectiveness in delivering instruction. Two recent studies provide different views of whether online education will increase student learning and success.

Online Learning: Does it Help Low-Income and Underprepared Students?

(Shanna Smith Jaggars, Community College Research Center Assessment of Evidence Series, CCRC Working Paper No. 26, January, 2011.)

This meta-analysis of existing research on the effectiveness of online education assessed the extent to which online learning is effective at instructing low-income and underprepared students. The analysis reviewed 34 studies published since 2000 that involved a sound quasi-experimental design and that avoided obvious biases, such as students self-selecting online courses or traditional courses. Some of the key findings from the study include:

- ▶ Students enrolled in online courses are less likely to complete courses than students who take traditional courses. This is particularly the case for community college students who have a disproportionate percentage of low-income and underprepared students.
- ▶ In general, studies have not found a measurable difference in student learning between online and traditional courses.
- ▶ Low-income and underprepared students enrolled in online courses are less likely to persist into subsequent academic terms.
- ▶ Reasons for student failure in online courses include the lack of a social connection with faculty or classmates, a lack of structure in the course and a lack of student supports.

Factors for Success: Characteristics of graduates in an online program.

(Vincent E. Shrader, Sydney Parent, David Breithaupt, Western Governors University.)

This study of 60 graduates from the Western Governors University online Master of Arts in Learning and Technology degree program sought to assess and identify: 1) student characteristics that predict success for online graduates, 2) factors that facilitate completion and 3) the strategies that are most effective for different student groups. The study looked at student experiences such as the characteristics of their online courses, time studying per week, a pre-assessment of knowledge, the number of months it took to complete the course, the number of email communications from students and a measure of student learning styles.

Findings from their analysis include:

- ▶ A student's ability to plan and set goals was the most significant factor in predicting how quickly a student completed an online course.
- ▶ Students who set aside a substantive and consistent amount of time to their studies completed their online courses more quickly.

The study provides valuable insights into how to construct the types of interaction that take place between the university and the student. Recommendations include: mentor/mentee interactivity, goal setting, capturing student interests, designing learning environments, providing feedback to students, helping students monitor progress and evaluating performance.

ECS Resources

Boosting College Completion

A project of the Education Commission of the States that works with state legislators to spur economic growth through increased college completion
<http://boostingcollegecompletion.org>

Other Resources

Learning Counts

Online resource developed by the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning that enables students to identify colleges that are willing to grant college credit to students through prior learning assessments
<http://www.learningcounts.org/Pages/Default.aspx>

Completion by Design

Recent initiative of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that is developing next-generation student success models through targeted interventions based on a model of the key indicators of student failure and momentum
<http://completionbydesign.org/>

CollegeProductivity.org

Online resource developed with support from the Lumina Foundation, that empowers states and higher education institutions to develop strategies that increase student success while controlling college costs
<http://www.collegeproductivity.org/>

The Sloan Consortium

A comprehensive resource for online learning
<http://sloanconsortium.org/>

WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET)

Accelerates the adoption of effective practices and policies, advancing excellence in technology-enhanced teaching and learning in higher education
<http://wcet.wiche.edu/>

Western Governors University

Provides students unique, competency-based, online postsecondary education that uses many of the strategies outlined in this issue
<http://wgu.edu>

FIRST CHOICE Implementation Guide 2009-2010

A section on credit recovery provides district guidelines for four program areas: admission and removal, instruction, content and curriculum, and grades – that inform thinking around state-level policy.
http://www.alsde.edu/general/FIRST_CHOICE_Implementation_Guide.pdf

Providing Just-In-Time Support Through Student Coaching

The Effects of Student Coaching in College: An Evaluation of a Randomized Experiment in Student Mentoring.

(Eric Bettinger and Rachel Baker, Stanford University School of Education, March 7, 2011.)

There is growing evidence that sophisticated student data systems allow for the implementation of intrusive, just-in-time interventions that keep students on track. Institutions that understand the early warning signs of failure for students can create systems to intervene when students exhibit those signs. A recent study from Eric Bettinger and Rachel Baker suggests that coaching/mentoring strategies that provide this support can increase success.

Bettinger and Baker studied the Inside Track program that works with universities to provide coaching services to students. Inside Track assigns a “coach” to regularly engage students about personal and school success issues by interacting with them via phone, email, text messaging and social networking sites. The goal of the college coach is to encourage student persistence and success by helping students navigate real-life barriers and develop strategies that facilitate student success.

The research design included an examination of student data for two academic years, 2003-04 and 2007-08, and conducted 17 different randomized studies measuring student achievement for students who participated in coaching programs vs. those who did not.

The research found that students who participated in coaching had higher rates of retention and college completion than non-coached students. Specific findings include:

- ▶ After 6, 12, 18 and 24 months, students who participated in coaching programs were significantly more likely to still be enrolled in college. Persistence rates were 5.3% greater after six months and still 3.4% greater after 24 months.
- ▶ Persistence rates did not change when the study controlled for student ACT score, high school GPA, on- or off-campus residence, financial aid or scholarship status, or involvement in remediation.

As states and systems consider low-cost options for increasing college attainment rates, it will be important for leaders to redefine the current postsecondary model, but also take measured approaches that realize the full potential of emerging innovations. Prior learning assessments, online learning and data analytic models that provide just-in-time support are the wave of the future for higher education — the question is how to effectively implement them in a manner that increases student success, ensures a high-quality degree and is cost-effective. Stay tuned to *The Progress of Reform* as we continue to look for new, evidenced-based strategies that lead to next generation education models.

Past issues of *The Progress of Education Reform* are available on our Web site at: www.ecs.org/per.

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