Key Steps for Student Success and Thriving Initiatives: Lessons Learned and Shared

Randall Stiles, Ph.D.

Student Success as Thriving

Thriving in college has been defined as being "fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally in the college experience." (Schreiner, 2013, p. 41). It can be measured by the Thriving Quotient, which only measures malleable and mutable domains of thriving, such that individuals who score low can participate in efforts to move them to a higher level of thriving. Given the practical nature of operationalizing results from the Thriving Quotient, we are planning to administer this measure across campus and work with campus partners to implement programming as appropriate, based on the results.

As part of our appreciation of the concept of thriving, we have also invested substantial effort in developing an understanding of the factors that facilitate student success, based on what students say has made them academically successful. These narratives and aggregated experiences have been influential in, and beneficial to, the work both of faculty and student affairs professionals. And, in pursuit of helping students thrive, we have used a combination of quantitative data, predictive analytics, and qualitative methods to increase our efforts to identify those students who are especially challenged with regard to thriving, in an effort to determine which interventions are most likely to provide them with the support they need.

We recognize that we are not alone in reframing our definition of, and thinking about, student success. For several years, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) has been providing support for student success initiatives through its Persistence and Completion Academy. Recently, a decision has been made to restructure that program with a focus on the multifaceted nature of student success, and the many stakeholders involved in supporting the broadest sense of what it means for students to be 'successful' in college (Quintero, 2018).

We also recognize that context and culture vary widely among colleges and universities and, as noted earlier, this variability no doubt plays a substantial role in student success outcomes. In any case, we have concluded that while challenging, a broad, holistic approach to both our research and operational activities that is now focused on both attrition and thriving has been especially effective.

Accreditation as a Catalyst for the Work of the Past Five Years

In addition to establishing

Collecting and Protecting High-Quality Data

The authors of this paper work in an office charged with providing analytic support and institutional research (IR) services for the college. Thomas Davenport, Jeanne Harris, and Robert Morison (2010, p.7) have noted that the questions addressed by analytics can be organized across two dimensions: time frame (past, present, and future) and innovation (known information or gaining new insights). During the past five years we have redoubled our efforts to collect and report on data from the past, to develop new, near-real-time alerts, and to explore the potential for predictive modeling. They also note that "You can't be analytical without quality data, and you can't be really good at analytics without really good data." (Davenport et al., 2010, p. 23).

Data Inventory

In the fall of 2013 and in support of one of the elements of Grinnell's strategic plan (to develop a culture of continuous planning and evidence-based decision-making), a Data Stewards Working Group was established and was tasked with developing a shared understanding of what is meant by "good data,"

thousands of students, IR work has to be predominantly quantitative in nature and generalizable to be helpful for decision makers. However, while patterns and statistical significance can be seen from such data, they provide limited assurance that the users of the data—those making decisions based on the data—fully understand the reasons the data are as they are. Effectively, we cannot claim to know what the data mean or how to interpret it appropriately without some additional background or context.

At Grinnell, we obtain that context and background through collecting and analyzing sizeable amounts of qualitative data, gathered mostly through individual in-depth interviews. The narratives that we hear then inform and expand our understanding of any number of issues that we also study quantitatively. Hearing from students about a topic in sufficient depth and breadth allows us to arrive at

mesh with experiences they have heard students recount. After the initial nodding of heads often then comes some form of cognitive push-back, commonly phrased as, "You are presenting things we already know." Faculty and staff are thus surprised when we express delight in their recognition of the themes, glad to hear the data have face validity. This interaction allows us the opportunity to point out that we are providing empirical data that support the lived experience of either audience members or students with

considered early on in the development of those initiatives. At present, even though we have recently achieved some of the best persistence and completion rates in the recent history of the college, we only have a rough sense of the relative effectiveness of many of these various programs. Our mission statement at Grinnell is quite explicit in expressing our intent to support students all the way through degree completion; this critically important work is understood to be everybody's business on our campus.

Wilcox, K., Dossani, R., Ng, V., & Graf, M. (2018). Mental health in college: Referral patterns, use of mental health services, perceived quality of treatment, and impact on academics among students at a highly selective college. Internal Report.

Wilcox, K.A., & Stiles, R.J. (2017) Thriving at the liberal arts college: Key issues, service models, and research for mental wellness. In S. Whalen (Ed.), Proceedings of the 13th National Symposium on Student Retention, Destin, Florida (pp. 467-475). Norman, OK: The University of Oklahoma.

Appendix

In the following we provide brief descriptions of fifteen initiatives undertaken at Grinnell during the past five years; this list demonstrates our efforts in moving from data to action and in engaging the whole campus community in this work. However, we do not intend to imply that a focus on student success is a new idea at this college; rather, what is perhaps new is the degree to which our research efforts are informing practice as well as the breadth and coordination of the work as a result of the campus-wide focus on our Quality Initiative. It is too early in some of these initiatives to rate the relative effectiveness of the fifteen actions described below. Our work has been focused thus far on implementing these initiatives and working with the data. A system-wide assessment of these activities in the future will help determine the effectiveness of each in relation to the other and within the context of Grinnell College.

The Predictive Modeling Project. This was a three-year project conducted in partnership with a commercial provider of predictive modeling services in higher education. The predictive model provided insights from two perspectives: "students" and "courses." The "students" perspective yields data on the probability of persistence based on a wide variety of student characteristics. The "courses" perspective provides data regarding how a student's course grade influences persistence and graduation, which courses offer the greatest probability of increasing graduation rates, and the courses in which students are most challenged. These predictive modeling results are one of the only sources of alerts at Grinnell for attrition among students with GPAs above 3.0—the majority of those students who leave the college prematurely.

- Data sources: Sources were largely from Grinnell's Colleague Student Information System but also included selected admission and financial aid data. The vendor was able to include some national census data based on the home of record for students. It important to note that social-psychological data were thought to be especially important but were not included in the analysis during the trial period. College staff are using such data in ongoing on-campus work now.
-

-

Grinnell. Next steps include analysis of existing data, now that outcome measures, including fall term GPA, are available for the study participants.

- Data sources: Students were asked to participate in an online, video, and writing-based intervention focused on why they think students might feel initially unsure about whether they fit in but ultimately overcome those fears. Data regarding participation in the intervention was combined with existing college data sources including; term grades, credit accumulation, and student status.
- Data usage: In order to estimate the impact of the intervention (treatment) on academic outcomes defined as mid-term assessment, 1st semester grade point average (GPA), and persistence we employ a treatment effects model (Angrist, 1998; Rubin, 1974, 2006). This type of model is commonly used to estimate the counterfactual or 'alternative universe' scenario.
- Impact on student success outcomes: The primary impact of the intervention, as measured by first-year student participants' fall Midterm Assessment and by first-semester GPA, is small and, in all but two cases, insignificant. This indicates that the intervention had little to no impact on students' initial academic outcomes in college. This result is counter to what was predicted in the research literature on which our intervention was based.

Advising Week: In the Second Grinnell Year program, seven events introduce resources and provide information about the opportunities and challenges of the second year, and support for choosing a major. (Lopatt(Lo-6). Tal aca (e oppding partieconF5.5 2015 A(al12.2 .0007 Tc 90.0003 Tw6.426290 Td(ght)g Wee)-3.4k4 (our