Choosing to Improve:

Voices from Colleges and Universities with Better Graduation Rates

By Kevin Carey

Approximately one million new students start out in four-year colleges every year. Virtually all of them enter with great hopes. Six years later, though, barely six in 10 will emerge with a baccalaureate degree. Among low-income and minority freshmen, the numbers are closer to five in 10.

If America's high schools did a better job of making sure their students were prepared for further study, these numbers could be a lot higher. They'd be higher still if federal and state policymakers had kept faith with low-income families by making sure financial-aid dollars for their children kept pace with the escalating costs of higher education.

But it turns out that practices within colleges and universities also have a big impact on student success. Some institutions, year in and year out, manage to graduate significantly more of their students than other institutions that are otherwise quite similar. Similar students, similar mission, but very different results.

To help identify unusually high-performing colleges and universities, the Education Trust created College Results Online (www.CollegeResults.org), an interactive Web tool that allows users to select any four-year college or university in the nation, and compare its graduation rates to other, similar institutions.

By putting institutional graduation rates in context, comparing a given university only to other institutions with similar students, funding, size, academic mission, etc.,[1] we can help control for outside factors that influence graduation rates, and better understand the impact of the institutions themselves. Looked at this way, some colleges and universities simply stand out from the crowd, consistently graduating more students than their peers, year after year. Some, too, stand out for their success with all groups of students: Unlike most colleges, they don't have a graduation-rate gap between White and minority students. And some stand out for the progress they are making in improving their graduation rates over time.

Learning from the leaders

Often, the graduation rates for these institutions aren't high in an absolute sense. In fact, many within these leading institutions are still dissatisfied with their results, and working hard to improve them. But they are doing better – often much, much better – than institutions that are otherwise a lot like them.

The existence of these high performers raises an obvious set of questions: What makes them so successful? What have they done that others might do too?

The answers are not at all simple. Universities are big, complicated organizations with a lot of moving parts, not easy to change quickly. Students themselves, and their reasons for staying or not staying in college, vary tremendously. There is no one solution to the graduation-rate problem, and there are many things yet to be learned. Nobody should pretend otherwise.

Over the past several decades, some scholars have studied these issues in depth. Their findings are highly useful for institutions that choose to take them to heart.
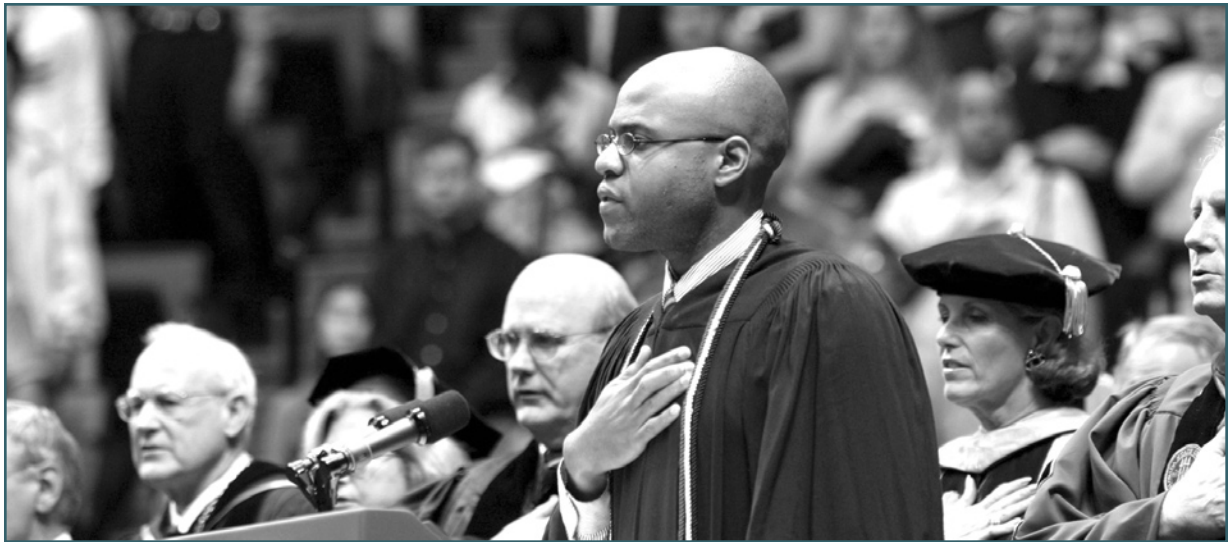
What does that research say? Basically, it says that three things matter a lot:

• It matters whether institutions focus on getting their students engaged and connected to the campus, particularly in the critical freshman year;

• It matters whether there is a genuine emphasis on the quality of undergraduate teaching and learning, because academic success and degree completion go hand in hand; and,

• It matters whether administrators and faculty monitor student progress, taking advantage of new data systems to tease out patterns of student success. Successful schools use that information not only to help individual students but also to make needed changes in policies and practice.

These things, of course, just plain make sense. But we wanted to find out for

ourselves if these principles are borne out in actual practice. In the latter half of 2004, Education Trust staff spoke with administrators and leaders at a number of the colleges and universities identified by College Results Online as having particularly high graduation rates compared to their peers. We visited some of the campuses and interviewed senior institutional leaders, working to understand why, from their perspective, they've been so successful.

Each institution had its own story to tell, no two exactly alike. But some common themes emerged, very much along the same lines as in the research.

The unusually successful colleges worked especially hard at connecting students, particularly those from low-income families, with the campus. They cared enough about the quality of teaching and learning that they did things like identify ineffective teachers and get them help. They constantly used data to

identify problem areas and monitor the effectiveness of policy changes.

But what really stuck with us, and yet isn't discussed as often, is how important campus leadership was in turning around graduation rates. The successful campuses, it turns out, don't just add a "Freshman Year Experience" here or a retention initiative there, checking off another box on the "best practices" list. Rather, they raise increasing student success to a high institutional priority, infuse that focus into almost everything they do, and regularly monitor key indicators to see whether they are making progress.

So we will, in effect, add a fourth bullet to the list of what matters:

• It matters a lot whether campus leaders make student success a top institution-wide priority—and when they stick with that priority over multiple years.

In the sections that follow, we describe what some of the

most successful institutions have told us about their success. Their voices are a powerful reminder of what is possible when institutions really focus on what matters most.

Engagement: Strong Connections between Students and Institutions

Most students who don't graduate are not kicked out for academic or other reasons; they just leave – sometimes quite close to a degree. High-performing institutions have found that when they build strong ties to their students, engaging students with the institution, their graduation rates improve. Simply put, the more students are connected, the less likely they are to disconnect.

Student engagement comes in many forms, from the way students connect socially to each other and the university community at large, to the way they connect academically with their chosen discipline and academic studies. For traditional residential campuses with a long history of institutional rites and traditions, deep student engagement often occurs as a matter of course. For newer commuter campuses, by contrast, connecting with students can be much harder.

The makeup of the student body is important too. Part-time students, older "non-traditional" students, low-income and first-generation college students often have a harder time

connecting with the institution. That's why College Results Online takes into account factors including students' age, financial aid, and part-time status, as well as whether institutions classify themselves as a "commuter campus." But even when you factor all of these things out, some institutions still do much better than others when it comes to graduation rates.

Why? Because engagement isn't just a product of what institutions are, it's also a function of what they *do*.

Researchers like Vincent Tinto of Syracuse University have studied student engagement in great detail, studying why undergraduates do, or don't, leave college before graduating. Among his many publications is *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, 1993. Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson, in publications including *Applying the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*, 1991, have also explored the things institutions can and should do to help their students learn and succeed. These resources and others like them are highly useful to educators and policymakers working to help students succeed.

Institutions that take these lessons to heart, implementing them in a serious, coordinated, and concerted fashion, can make a real difference for their students. Florida State University, for example, is an institution that has a very small graduation gap for minority students – unlike most

institutions, graduation rates for African-American and White students are virtually the same. Administrators there believe this success is in part a function of how they engage their students. For example, the university began employing professional full-time advisers in 1995, with the expectation that advisers would contact every student at least three times a semester – either face-to-face, by telephone or by email.

"We put advisers wherever students are – in the library, in the student union, in the residence halls," Provost Lawrence Abele told us. "We tried in the gyms but that turned out to be a bust. This year, we will have as much contact from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m., in the off-hours, as we will have in the traditional hours."

"We aren't expected to be parents," Abele said, "but we can do a lot of other things. Simply contacting students makes a difference."

Quality advising is part of a strategy of making sure that students have a clear sense of what's expected of them and what it takes to stay on course. Effective institutions try to help students avoid wrong turns or unexpected obstacles on the road to graduation.

As we describe in more detail on page 4, St. Mary's University, a private college in San Antonio that has higher graduation rates than its peers, helps its predominantly Latino population by immediately familiarizing new freshmen with every required class and activity from their freshman to senior years. This includes everything

St. Mary's University : Quality Teaching Yields Latino Success

St. Mary's University, where 75 percent of students are Latino, has an overall six-year graduation rate of 63.3 percent -- greater than most similar institutions and far above that of most other Hispanic Serving Institutions. And its Latino graduation rate is virtually the same as its White graduation rate.

Anthony J. Kaufmann, dean of the School of Science, Engineering and Technology (SET), attributes that success to a concentrated focus on quality teaching. "We are known for our teaching, both on campus and off of it," says Kaufmann. "We want to make sure that our students are well-prepared for whatever their goals are."

SET is the university's largest program, and it can boast that about 50 percent of St. Mary's students who apply to medical or dental schools are admitted. In fact, St. Mary's ranks in the top 10 nationally for the number of Mexican-American students accepted into medical schools.

One of the things that accounts for that success is that SET has established learning objectives for each of its courses as well as standards of learning for each major the school offers. Both outline what students are expected to learn and know, giving students a clear academic roadmap.

As a result, Kaufmann says, SET has been able to be very focused about what their students learn prior to graduation. "Graduation is the key," says Kaufmann. "It's not just about retention; the goal has to be graduating students who are well-prepared for graduate school or the work world." The school checks on how successful it has been by sending a follow-up survey three years after graduation to employers and graduates themselves.

Immediately after students arrive on campus they meet with their departments,

so that they are immediately connected with faculty members and their advisers. "But even before that," says David P. Manuel, vice president of academic affairs, "they have seen the advising handbook which clearly tells them what is expected of them and what they can expect from their advisors."

The handbook is a 75-page booklet that outlines every required class and activity for students from their freshman to senior years, covering everything from submitting a resume to the career office to completing a service-learning project. Its core curriculum checklist helps students keep track of which classes they have to take and when. Faculty advisors track students' completion of the requirements on line to make sure they are on track. "It does seem kind of pedantic," says Manuel. "But the reality is that college is a new experience. Our students need that kind of guidance if they are going to be successful."

Faculty members are alerted to students who need additional support. Students who miss class often receive a call from the faculty member asking the reason. If students struggle in writing, computation or even a personal issue, says Manuel, "we contact that student and get them the assistance they need. We try to isolate the problem and get them going in the right direction." Manuel calls this approach "watchful attentiveness aimed at improving student success."

That kind of guidance is extended to faculty, as well. Each department works slightly differently. For example, the engineering department

assigns new faculty members a senior faculty member as a mentor who visits and observes classes. Those observations, along with observations by the department chair and carefully crafted student surveys are used to identify those faculty members who need additional support. Those who do are directed to the university's teaching and learning center.

This careful focus on teaching and learning, along with the sense that both new students and new faculty need support contributes to an intense feeling of community that is reflected in the comments of students. "This is a place where they really care about you," says Michelle Gonzales, the president of St. Mary's student body and a senior scheduled to graduate in May 2005. "You get this feeling of community – that everyone, your professors, the staff, everybody – wants you to succeed and will help in every way they can."

St. Mary's University
San Antonio, TX

|	
Undergrad enrollment	2,441
Pell Grant recipients	37%
Median SAT	1065
Gender	
Men	41.1%
Women	58.9%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	21.1%
Latino	68.5%
Other	10.4%
Overall 6-year grad rate	63.3%
Latino grad rate	63.1%

Source: College Results Online

from course planning to service learning to submitting a resume to the university career services office and updating it regularly. Faculty advisers track students' completion of requirements online to ensure progress.

St. Mary's is one of many

institutions paying particular attention to incoming freshmen. Another, Alcorn State, is described in more detail on page 5. These institutions know that engagement is often at its most tenuous in the first year, months, or even weeks

of college, as students make what is sometimes a wrenching transition to a new environment and way of life. To make this change more successful, many institutions have created "freshman seminars" that focus on study skills, money

Alcorn State : Extra Attention for Freshman and Sophomores Pays Off
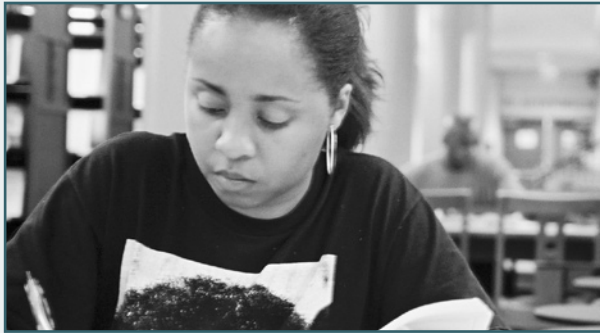
About 20 years ago, Alcorn State University, a historically Black college in Mississippi, took a hard look at its retention rates. "We were losing about 50 percent of our freshmen," says Dr. Malvin Williams, provost and vice president for academic affairs. "We decided that was unacceptable."

A study team was sent to colleges and universities all over the country to find what programs seemed to help institutions retain and promote their students. From that research emerged a two-year program, the College for Excellence, that college officials credit with improving retention and graduation rates.

The College for Excellence is a concentrated program for freshmen and sophomores that students must successfully complete before being admitted to a major program.

"We pulled all of the services that dealt with freshmen or sophomores – advising, counseling, developmental and the core curriculum – under one umbrella, the College for Excellence," says Williams. "That included all of the social, support and academic programs that involved the first two years of college."

"For example, an entering student is assigned a College for Excellence adviser in addition to a faculty adviser in his or her major. "The faculty advisers will often focus on the issues of course selection," says Williams. "But after registration, students will most often deal with their more general advisors. We have found that after students have left the College for Excellence, they will still return to that freshman advisor for support and guidance."

The faculty academic advisers are carefully selected by their departments based on their ability to work with freshmen and then are trained by the College for Excellence. "There were a few turf battles in the beginning," says Williams. "Some faculty felt they had a God-given right to advise majors, whether they were good at it or not. But I think most feel pretty good about it when they see that they have students who are much better prepared for upper-level work."

One change all faculty immediately supported was the lowering of class size in the courses designed for freshmen and sophomores. Most classes now have fewer than 25 students – particularly the English composition classes. "That is where we are putting a heavy emphasis," says Williams, in order to make sure students are ready for upper-level classes.

Every full-time faculty member is expected to teach at least one freshman-level class, which means that at least master's level faculty are teaching freshmen – no adjuncts or graduate students.

Because most freshmen come into Alcorn State needing at least one developmental course, the College for Excellence puts great care into making sure that students get the most out of those courses. "If we have done what we were supposed to up front – taking care of their deficiencies – they should be able to move through their program without repeating courses," says Williams.

Developmental math is taught by math faculty, but the dean of the College for Excellence helps set the standards and curriculum for the course. "And together they put in an exit exam to see how those students in that developmental math course would perform in the upper level curriculum," says Williams. "It was a way to centralize our efforts around the first two years of college."

All this effort means that Alcorn State now retains approximately 75 percent of its freshmen through the sophomore year. The university's six-year graduation rate is better than the median of its peer institutions by about 10 percentage points.

One area Williams is working on is improving student-faculty engagement. Since the campus is fairly isolated (17 miles from the nearest stop light), and 90 percent of students live on campus, Alcorn State has an opportunity for intense interaction. "We need to take advantage of that time and get our faculty working with [students] outside of class and after hours," says Williams. "We try and make sure that each department has seminars and events once or twice a month that bring students and faculty together outside of class. It is essential that in the first two years they have interaction with professors, that they are able to see them as people beyond the ones who give them all this work."

This is part of – what Williams sees as continuing the improvements of the past. "The College for Excellence was the first step. We must now continue to evaluate and improve this process," he says.

Alcorn State
Alcorn State, MS

Undergrad enrollment	2,459
Pell Grant recipients	79.9%
Median SAT	865
Gender	
Men	39.9%
Women	60.1%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	5.2%
African American	92.4%
Other	2.4%

Increase in 6-Year Grad Rates Over Time:

Year	Rate
1997	33.4
2000	44.7
2003	47.9
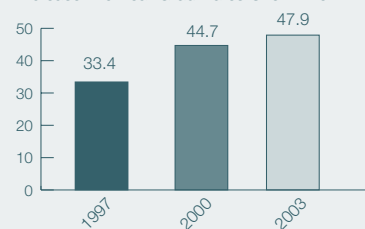
management, test preparation, health, career management, etc. While such courses are now fairly common in higher education, some are better than others. Organizations like the Policy Center on the First Year of College have assembled research-based guidelines, sample surveys, and publications designed to help institutions create first-year experiences that maximize student success.[2]

Some institutions, Florida State among them, don't even wait for the freshman year to begin, bringing in under-prepared students over the summer to give them a head start. These, too, are important opportunities to create connections between students and institutions.

In the end, there are a whole host of things institutions can do to better engage their students. To measure institutional success in making those connections, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has surveyed tens of thousands of students at hundreds of colleges and universities in recent years (see below.) Not surprisingly, NSSE survey results indicate that the institutions that have better graduation rates do a better job than other campuses of creating a supportive campus environment, promoting student-faculty interaction, creating engaging learning experiences, and generally connecting to students.

The National Survey of Student Engagement

One of the more prominent recent efforts to build on the engagement model of higher education success is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), located at the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University–Bloomington. For the past five years, students from more than 850 colleges and universities have answered questions on the NSSE survey that gauge the nature and frequency of participation in a range of academic and social activities that are related to student success. The carefully designed survey gathers data from students about:

• Academic challenge – including the number and length of written reports, hours spent studying and preparing for class, reading requirements, and the need to synthesize and organize ideas.

• Active and collaborative learning – including working with other students inside and outside class, participating in class discussions, making presentations, tutoring, and community-based projects.

• Student-faculty interaction – including faculty feedback, working with faculty on research projects and other activities, and discussing assignments and career plans with faculty.

• Enriching educational experiences – including interaction with students of diverse economic, social, and racial backgrounds, community service and volunteer work, learning communities, internships, practicum, field work, independent study, and culminating senior experiences.

•Supportive campus environment – including how campuses help students cope with non-academic responsibilities like work and family, the quality of relationships with faculty, administration, and other students, and the presence of social supports.

NSSE researchers have analyzed the relationship between these survey results and institutional graduation rates as reported to U.S. Department of Education. They found statistically significant correlations between first-year student and senior engagement levels and institutional graduation rates at the $p<.001$ level for all five dimensions of student engagement.[3] In other words, institutions that had higher student engagement scores tended to have higher graduation rates. Colleges and universities that take care to connect with their students both in and out of the classroom, those that are most successful in creating a university environment that is academically rich and constructive, reap benefits in terms of enhanced student completion. Good educational practices, persistence, and graduation go hand in hand.

Improving Student Preparation

Higher education can play an active role in improving preparation among entering students. Indeed, around the country there is a good deal of activity underway aimed at doing just that.

Many institutions, for example, sponsor TRIO programs--like Upward Bound--to assist low-income students to learn about college and to take the right courses in secondary school.

Recognizing the central importance of a rigorous, college-preparatory curriculum, some colleges have worked with nearby school systems to make the college-prep curriculum the "default" curriculum for all students. In Texas this movement has now become statewide; Indiana is moving in the same direction.

Because high school exams don't always test at the college-ready level, some colleges administer their placement tests in high school to help students know whether they are prepared. The California State University has recently taken an even bolder step by designing an add-on to the regular state "standards test" that will give students information on their readiness for collegiate study and serve as Cal State's principal placement vehicle.

The City University of New York does something similar with the state high school Regents examination. By achieving a higher cut score than the one required for high school graduation, students can place out of remedial courses. In both instances, the universities also give students who don't meet those standards assistance to meet them by the end of their senior year.

NSSE is also heavily focused on what happens in the classroom, reflecting the fact that student success is a function of both social and academic engagement. Many of the most important connections that students make to their institution take place as a direct result of how – and how well – they learn.

More Learning, Better Teaching

Institutions like Alcorn State and St. Mary's aren't only focused on keeping students connected to the campus. They also devote a great deal of attention to engagement with learning. When higher education institutions do a better job of educating undergraduates, those students are more likely to succeed academically and finish college.

Surprisingly, this idea is by no means a given in discussions of graduation rates. Some in higher education worry that a focus on graduation rates will lead institutions to water down academic standards and just pass everyone along, handing out degrees irrespective of whether students have really earned them.

This is a false choice. Of course, students need to learn *and* to finish, and we can't compromise one for the other. If anything, some college students suffer from a lack of high academic expectations. As Tinto has noted:

"Students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that expect them to succeed....Students, especially those who have been historically excluded from higher education, are affected by the campus expectational climate and by their own perceptions of the expectations that faculty and staff hold for their individual performance. Unfortunately, too many institutions do not expect enough of their students, demand too little as regards student learning."[4]

Both research and common sense suggest that we don't have to compromise academic quality

7

The University of Notre Dame : A Better Way of Teaching

The University of Notre Dame has one of the highest overall graduation rates in the nation, greaer than similar institutions. University officials attribute that success to a close attention to undergraduate teaching and learning.

This attention can be seen in its reaction to student failure. For example, university officials noticed that 15 percent of students in the fall semester of freshman chemistry either dropped the class or received a grade of D or F. Even more students dropped out during the second semester of the class. Although university officials didn't realize it until later, students of color were two to three times more likely to drop or fail the course as white students.

"The problem was that they were not just dropping four credit hours," says Vice President and Associate Provost Dennis Jacobs, who oversees the university's undergraduate studies. "Chemistry is a gateway course for a number of majors, so dropping it meant that they were abandoning what they had planned for their future – a potential career in science, medicine, or engineering."

Jacobs, a chemistry professor, redesigned Notre Dame's general chemistry course in 1997 to respond to the high rate of failure. The new, alternative chemistry class was offered to those students whose scores on the math portion of the SAT or ACT tests were in the lowest quartile at Notre Dame. The alternative course covered the same material as the traditional course, but Jacobs formed mandatory study-group sections where students worked together weekly on creating solutions to challenging problems.

"We're asking students to do much more difficult problems than students are given in the regular class, but they work on them in teams," says Jacobs.

Students who moved through the redesigned course were 50 percent more likely to complete two full years of chemistry than other students who also had math scores in the lowest quartile and had been in the traditional general chemistry sequence. The students in the new course were also 50 percent more likely to pursue majors in science or in the health professions.

As a reflection of the success of the alternative chemistry class, the chemistry department has proposed adopting it as a model for all the freshman chemistry classes.

The same kind of entry-level course redesign was undertaken by Notre Dame's College of Engineering, which revamped its first-year engineering course to focus on hands-on projects. Teams of students work on projects like launching projectiles, designing and building data scanners, and creating and programming robots for specific jobs. The course has led to a modest increase in the retention of engineering majors, with women showing the greatest gains.

This kind of close attention to the undergraduate experience is reflected elsewhere in the university. For example, students are not permitted to declare a major until the end of their first year. "Clearly, students have an idea what they may like to major in, and we help them select appropriate courses that will advance them in their intended major, but we also want them to experience a diverse set of disciplinary courses that will broaden their perspective," says Jacobs.

Unlike many universities, students do not apply for or enroll in particular colleges. Rather, all freshmen enter the same "first-year program" with specific requirements (two semesters of philosophy, two of science, and so on) that provide the basis for a classic liberal arts education.

Freshmen are also required to take a "university seminar," small classes with about 17 students per section, in which they write extensive papers and are immersed in "an intimate academic environment where they are expected to really engage with the material," says Jacobs. "Even in our larger courses we try to create smaller recitation sections where students can work on class material together."

University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, IN

|	
Undergrad enrollment	8,299
Pell Grant recipients	8%
Median SAT	1365
Gender	
Men	53.4%
Women	46.6%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	79.5%
African American	3.6%
Asian	4.9%
Latino	7.8%
Overall 6-year grad rate	94.6%

Source: College Results Online

The University of Northern Iowa : No Silver Bullet to Solving Problems

At the University of Northern Iowa, no one particular program or strategy caused increased graduation rates over the past seven years. "We don't solve problems for 14,000 students with one solution," says Provost Aaron Podolefsky. "It takes a lot of solutions to solve the problems."

One important strategy came about when a senior student complained to Podolefsky that he hadn't been able to register for a required course.

"For about five seconds my first instinct was to blame the student – that he just wasn't paying attention to the classes he needed. So I decided to head over to the Registrar's office, check the records and get to the bottom of it," Podolefsky says. "And it turns out the student had tried to register for the class four times and really couldn't get into it." Because it was the first in a four-course sequence, the student's graduation would be delayed at least a year. This experience began a careful look at some of the ways the university itself had been hampering graduation
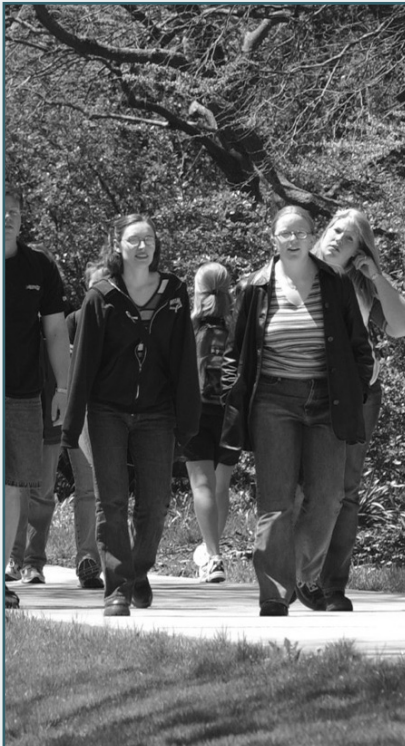
without realizing it.

"We were creating the obstacles," says Podolefsky. "We had to change."

After that, university officials examined each of its degree programs and what it took to complete a degree from beginning to end. That helped answer the puzzling question of why many students graduated with more credit hours than their program required.

"In some cases, I found that students weren't able to get in the classes they needed in a reasonable amount of time," Podolefsky says. "Sometimes it was the first course in a sequence of courses, and not getting that course meant that they couldn't take any of the others. Sometimes they weren't able to get into that course until their senior year. Students need to be full-time to keep financial aid, so that meant taking more courses and another year of school."

That actually created odd, unexpected logjams because, for example, a business major might fill in with sociology courses while waiting for his major courses, thus blocking a freshman sociology major from getting her needed courses, creating a domino effect across disciplines.

Podolefsky asked the deans and program leaders to make sure there were enough opportunities for students to take necessary courses. "Once the problem was pointed out to them, most of them were able to solve it," says Podolefsky. "They all want to help students. Everybody jumped right on board."

In many cases, simply offering one more section of a class per semester substantially reduced the backlog that had been built up.

But to prevent future problems, the University of Northern Iowa

University of Northern Iowa	
Cedar Falls, IA	
Undergrad enrollment	10,959
Pell Grant recipients	23.9%
Median SAT	1045
Gender	
Men	42.2%
Women	57.8%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	92.9%
African American	2.7%
Other	4.4%
Overall 6-year grad rate	65.1%

Source: College Results Online

created a new online degree audit to allow students to map out their college careers, meaning that they can now determine which requirements they haven't yet met, how their requirements would change if they switch majors, and which credits will carry over between programs.

"It has been overwhelmingly popular," Podolefsky says.

In 2000, the university began a new online tool, which gives a template of courses for each program. Students can see how changes would affect their graduation. If they change what the university calls a "critical path course"-- for example, the first of a three-course sequence that must begin in the fall -- the program warns the student that it may delay graduation. It provides similar warnings, if necessary, to students considering a change in major.

"The moral of this story," says Podolefsky, "is that when you get a complaint, don't assume it's the student's fault. Investigate, and if you find it's a real problem, try to solve it for that student and you will probably solve it for a lot of students."

Syracuse University: A Commitment to Teaching and Research

Syracuse University has seen a steady increase in its graduation rates for the past six years, an increase attributed by many at the university to a subtle but fundamental change in how the university sees itself. Rather than a research institution that also teaches undergraduates, it now defines itself, in the words of Provost Deborah Freund, as "a university that is equally committed to excellence in both teaching and research."

Although to outsiders that may seem a semantic distinction, it has meant changes along a number of fronts, from reducing class size in all introductory-level classes in all disciplines to paying attention to how students spend their time outside of class.

But, perhaps most fundamental, Freund says she made it clear that "I would only support tenure decisions that reflect what we valued. We want to promote and tenure faculty who have distinguished themselves both in their scholarship and in teaching."

At the customary third-year review of tenure-track faculty, faculty members are evaluated on their teaching with a combination of student evaluations and, in some departments, observations and peer assessments. Those whose teaching is found wanting are told, "Here's what you need to work on, where you have to improve, and how to get help," says Freund.

When Freund denied tenure recommendations on the basis of the quality of teaching, that was a powerful message that teaching was taken seriously, she says. "The Syracuse model has been that you have to be great at both [research and teaching]. People who come here believe that the two aren't mutually exclusive."

The shift in university culture, led by former Chancellor Kenneth Shaw, happened in part because Syracuse was facing a serious problem in the early 1990s: falling enrollment and graduation rates, which led to reduced revenues and a budget deficit of $38 million. These trends were coupled with the results of a 1989 campus survey that found that most faculty members thought the university overemphasized research at the expense of teaching.

Shaw "challenged the university – every part of it – to come up with a plan to become more student-centered. He said we should strive to be the nation's best student-centered research university," Freund says.

Over the years, the university has done a few things to make itself more "student-centered," including convening a retention council to study the data from each college and program to see who was leaving and why.

Research done by the Center for Retention Services and the Center for the Support of Teaching has dispelled many of the myths about why students left, according to the director of the Center for Support of Teaching, Barbara Ann Yonai. "For many of the reasons that were raised, we were able to show they weren't the only reason," Yonai says. For example, many thought that financial need was an issue. "That alone is not why students leave," Yonai says, although her center – along with the university's Center for Retention Services – is still investigating whether it plays a contributing role in some students leaving.

One of the patterns the

researchers noticed was that Syracuse had quite a number of students who left in the fourth year, only a few credits shy of graduation. Yonai and others found that students either thought they had graduated or had been unable to get their transcripts to reflect transfer credits or to clear up incomplete grades. The university helped students cut through those

Syracuse University
Syracuse, NY

Undergrad enrollment	11,786
Pell Grant recipients	20.1%
Median SAT	1225
Gender	
Men	42.9%
Women	57.1%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	68.8%
African American	5.9%
Asian	5.4%
Latino	4.1%
Overall 6-year grad rate	81.0%

Increase in Grad Rates Over Time:

Year	Rate
1997	68.8
1998	71.2
1999	71.9
2000	74.0
2001	75.3
2002	77.0
2003	81.0
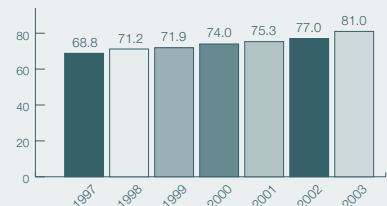
Source: College Results Online

Syracuse University, continued from previous page:

red tape problems which raised graduation rates 1 percent, Yonai says.

When research found that many students failed to feel connected to the university, the university began dorm-based "learning communities" based on students' academic interests. Yonai is now undertaking research to see if that has actually worked in making students feel more connected and choosing to stay.

In addition, the university began offering an alcohol awareness program, known as Alcohol 101, as part of its first-year experience. "If you put that program in, you are building in reminders about health, nutrition and exercise," says Ron Cavanagh, vice president for undergraduate studies. "All those

things are elements of retention, although no one would think of them as retention." In a related development, when students asked for more alternatives to spending time in the bars, the university agreed to keep the gym open for longer hours. "It worked and we saw a decrease in alcohol violations," says Barry Wells, senior vice president and dean of student affairs. "It wasn't done under the name of student success or retention, but it is absolutely about that."

For newly appointed Chancellor Nancy Cantor, there is still work to be done. She reflects the view of a growing number of people in higher education that one way to retain undergraduates is to make sure they are included directly

in the research mission of the university, rather than keep them peripheral to it.

"The next question is, how do we really engage students into the research process," Cantor says. "To make sure the learning is really collaborative and involved in the scholarship that the university must have."

The university has already taken one step in that direction: The laboratory space in the new life sciences buildings was designed with the expectation that faculty would invite groups of students in. "We need to make that type of engagement very natural and very easy for the faculty and the students," Cantor says. "Those are part of the cues we give about what we value."

or lower expectations – in fact, better academic practices and better graduation rates go hand in hand.

For example, statistical analyses of results from the NSSE have found that the greater the level of students' academic challenge, the higher the graduation rates at given institutions (See page 8.) NSSE gathers data on factors such as the number and length of written reports, hours spent studying and preparing for class, reading requirements, and the need to synthesize and organize ideas. The more students are challenged, the more they respond, stay engaged, and stay in school.

NSSE also studies the overall nature of the academic experience, looking at factors like student-faculty interaction, community-based projects, student participation in class discussions, and students working together both inside

and outside of class. These factors are also tied to a higher likelihood of college completion.

NSSE results underscore the fact that colleges and universities make choices in how they organize and conduct undergraduate education, and some of those choices work better than others. The standard model of hundreds of undergraduates packed into large lecture halls passively listening to someone talk is

still very common. But some institutions are trying to do things differently – and are seeing better results.

Some, for example, have created "learning communities" where groups of students take multiple, thematically linked courses together. Instead of being isolated learners, these students work together to share knowledge, learning, and responsibility for success. Some researchers have found a link between student participation

At Elizabeth City State University : Everyone Helps

At Elizabeth City State University, everyone is encouraged to feel responsible for helping students graduate. Chancellor Mickey Burnim "has made it clear that we all have a role to play in our students' success – from the registrar to the groundskeepers," says Dr. Carolyn Mahoney, provost at this historically black, public university in northeastern North Carolina.

"In some cases, it comes down to a housekeeper noticing that a student in their building hasn't been going to class, and she tells an RA, who checks in and finds out what is going on," she says.

"Those things don't seem like they make much of a difference, but the accumulated impact is significant."

The university works to nurture success in other ways, too. Two task forces have been established designed to look at the big and small ways to improve graduation rates.

Students are encouraged to take 15 units or less each semester so they won't be overwhelmed by their course loads. To ensure that students feel connected to the university and its faculty, classes are kept small: a ratio of about 20 students for every professor.

Students' academic progress is monitored closely. Each student's faculty adviser works with the Registrar's Office to track mid-term grades, and advisers are expected to meet with any students who are having difficulty.

The attention to detail pays off. A few years ago, the mid-term grade reports showed that some freshman students -- several of whom had been honors students in high school – were dropping a first-year algebra class, although they had been performing just fine in other classes. Mahoney, who reviews the mid-term reports and is a mathematician herself, traced the problem to a single instructor, who was temporarily reassigned to other classes and received additional professional development.

And under a policy established in 1928, class attendance is mandatory. Students generally are allowed only two or three unexcused absences each semester before facing consequences, such as lowered grades. "The goal is to get them to class," Mahoney says.

"Our students know that their professors will call them when they miss class, and when necessary, tell them to get out of bed and into class."

The strategies are working. In 2003, this school of about 2,000 undergraduates had a six-year graduation rate of 50.5 percent, a much higher rate of success than at similar schools.

At Elizabeth City State, Mahoney says, "Everyone is aware of what we have to be about -- helping students achieve."

Elizabeth City State
Elizabeth City, NC

Undergrad enrollment	2,039
Pell Grant recipients	63.8%
Median SAT	810
Gender	
Men	38.5%
Women	61.5%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	19.6%
African American	79%
Other*	1.4%
Overall 6-Year grad rate	50.5%
African-American grad rate	54.0%

*Source: College Results Online

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in learning communities and their likelihood of persisting in higher education.[5]

One university using learning communities is Tennessee State, a historically Black institution whose graduation rate is higher than most of its peers. Students in the "Emerging Scholars Program" at Tennessee State take multiple courses together in communities designed to promote active and collaborative learning. The program also focuses on integrating remedial students into the university community, and integrating various remedial curricula with one another and the college curricula at large.

The whole issue of remedial education – teaching college students who are under-prepared for college – is especially critical at the less selective public institutions that enroll a disproportionate number of low-income, minority, and first-generation students, and tend to have very low graduation rates. These students are more likely to have been given a substandard K-12 education, and are more likely to face additional financial and academic barriers to college success. As a result, they're more likely to be among the 20 percent of all students starting at four-year colleges and universities who have to take at least one remedial course in reading, writing or math.[6] Studies indicate that students who need remedial reading instruction, or who need remediation in multiple subjects, are unlikely to complete their degree on time.[7]

In many institutions, remedial classes are stand-alone courses, separate from regular academic departments. This approach can marginalize and

stigmatize students who are already at risk of dropping out for a variety of other reasons. Schools like Tennessee State are trying to provide help differently.

Developmental courses are not the only target for closer examination of data, though. Some high- performing colleges and universities have found that they can make important progress by tackling high failure rates in so-called "weed-out" courses, especially in the sciences. Instead of seeing it as a strange mark of pride that many new college students are unable to succeed in their courses, these institutions are beginning to ask themselves whether they – not just the students – could stand improvement.

For example, the University of Notre Dame (See page 8.) whose 94.6 percent graduation rate is higher than its peers and one of the highest in country, has taken steps to change the way introductory chemistry and engineering courses are organized and taught.

These improvements came after administrators noticed unusually high failure rates in those courses, particularly for minority students. As a result of the changes, more students are succeeding and moving forward.

Similarly, researchers like Uri Treisman at the University of Texas have shown how institutions can improve student success rates in tough "gatekeeper" courses like calculus, not by watering down standards, but by deliberately structuring those courses to promote more intensive and collaborative learning among students. These reforms have improved success rates in those courses, particularly for minority students.[8]

Institutions should also keep student learning front and center when they decide who gets to teach in the first place. Hiring and promotion policies can and should reflect the central importance of quality undergraduate instruction.

Syracuse University, for example, an institution that has improved graduation rates for six years running, makes teaching quality a strong focus of the tenure-review process. Professors who fall short in this area are given guidance on how to improve. Failure to improve can lead to denial of tenure (See page 10.)

Using Data to Understand and Improve Student Success

One of the main challenges for institutions newly focused on improving graduation rates is deciding where to begin. Fortunately, there are new tools available to help make such decisions that haven't existed in the past. Changes in the cost, speed, and power of information technology have vastly increased the potential for colleges and universities to use data to better understand how to improve graduation rates. Most institutions have been gathering large amounts of data for a long time, mostly for administrative or regulatory purposes. But until recent years, those
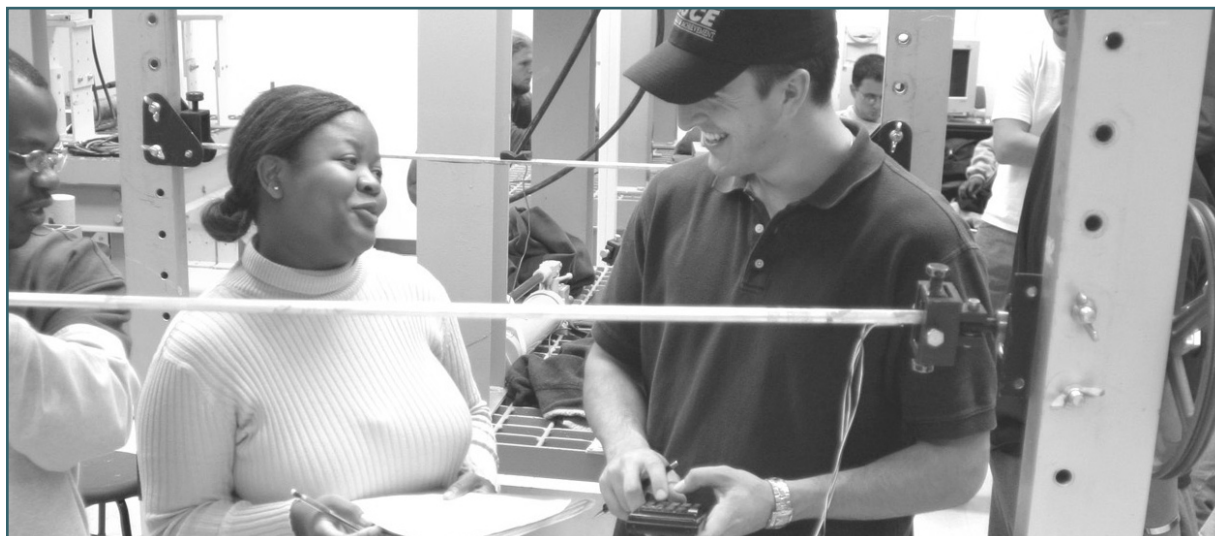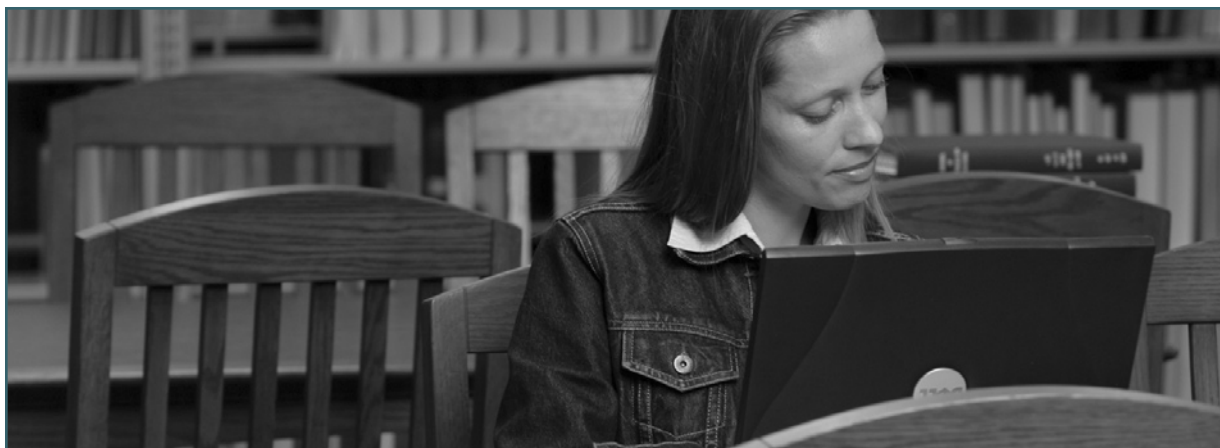
processes were narrowly focused and unconnected to one another, producing raw data that was difficult to access and analyze.

Things are different now. Many institutions now maintain accessible, detailed, student-level records containing a wealth of information about things like course-taking patterns, demographics, student aid amounts, residency, transfers, and much more.

It's really no longer a question of whether institutions can get the data they need – it's whether they invest in analyzing the data they already have. Using information to drive improvement was a consistent theme among the various high-performing institutions we contacted. Many university leaders described how a thorough, careful examination of data detailing various dimensions of university practice and student success brought them a new understanding of how to improve.

One example is the University of Connecticut, a public doctoral/research institution whose graduation rate is higher than most of its peers. UConn also has an unusually small graduation rate gap for minority students. In 1999, the university created a Retention and Student Success Task Force, a university-wide initiative, composed of students, faculty and staff, designed to determine the best strategies to help more students persist and receive their degrees. Dolan Evanovich, a university vice president and leader of the project, said the natural starting place was the data:

"When we were able to stack years of data together and were able to see the trends, we felt a greater comfort level about what our students were doing during their college careers and what we could do to affect them. We've sliced the data in nearly every way imaginable – in-state vs. out-of-state students, students who were dismissed vs. those who left voluntarily, students who came in performing at high levels vs. those who were low-performing. We have begun to see the trends emerge and have begun to fix some of the problems with targeted as well as broader programs."

"The data," said Evanovich, "moves you beyond the anecdotes and personal understanding – the 'my neighbors' kid' stories. We can show the real picture of what happens to our students. Using the data, we were able to make the case for the resources, to add seven additional academic advisers to give our students more guidance.

"There are dozens of initiatives – we have created an early warning system based on mid-semester grades to notify students that they are falling behind. But it all started with the data – knowing more about what was happening with our students," he said.

Another institution using data to drive improvement is the University of Northern Iowa, which has one of the highest graduation rates of any public Masters I institution in the nation. Borrowing a tool from the corporate world, UNI conducted a "critical path analysis" to determine exactly what it takes for students to complete a degree in various majors from beginning to end, and then mapped that process back against its database of

student coursetaking patterns. In doing so, it learned that a number of students had to delay graduation because they couldn't enroll in the courses they needed for their degree. (See page 9 for more detail.)

Careful internal data analyses can help institutions uncover hidden opportunities to help more students finish college. The prevalence of "first-year" programs like those discussed above reflects the fact that students are more likely to drop out in their first year in college than in any other year. But it's also true that a large number of students leave with a year or more of college already under their belt. In many ways these are the "low hanging fruit" of the graduation rate problem.[9] They have a proven ability to succeed in college, but for a variety of reasons lost momentum to graduation – in some cases, just short of the academic finish line.

For example, an internal analysis of non-graduates at Syracuse University found

some students only a handful of credits short of a degree. After contacting those students, Syracuse discovered that some of them mistakenly believed they had already graduated, while others simply needed to resolve bureaucratic issues related to incomplete courses or transfer credits (See page 10.)

The University of New Mexico has a program to target students who left college after earning more than 98 credits, tracking them down and pledging to work with them to find a way for them to complete their degree (See page 18.) As a result, more than a thousand additional students have graduated from college.

The process of analyzing data and acting on information runs throughout much of what high-performing institutions have told us about their success.

Identifying students who need more advising, targeting under-prepared students for first-year programs, re-engineering courses with unacceptable failure rates

– all of these efforts share the common trait of being driven by careful analysis of information. High-performing institutions are always striving to learn more about their students, to develop new ways to help them succeed.

Putting it All Together: Leadership and Organizational Culture

The examples above provide just a hint of what's possible when it comes to helping more students succeed. There are many things that universities can do to get better. Few can plausibly say that they have no room to improve.

At the same time, institutions shouldn't treat these individual success stories simply as discrete programs to be copied, and nothing more.

The danger is that attempts to improve graduation rates become nothing more than

a laundry list of dutifully adopted "best practices," untailored to the institution's individual mission and students, uncoordinated with one another, and below the high standards of quality that students need. As Vincent Tinto, the Syracuse University researcher, has noted: "While it is true that retention programs abound on our campuses, most institutions have not taken student retention seriously.

"They have done little to change the essential character of college, little to alter the prevailing character of student educational experience, and therefore little to address the deeper roots of student attrition. As a result, most efforts to enhance student retention, though successful to some degree, have had more limited impact than they could or should."[10]

The difference between merely emulating the practice of high performers and truly emulating their success is leadership. Colleges and universities can't ultimately do right by their students unless the urgent need to learn, adapt, improve and succeed comes straight from the top. Each institution's unique organizational culture – the values and norms that guide people's thinking day in and day out – must become overwhelmingly student-focused. Everyone needs to know that when push comes to shove, students matter most. Nobody believes this is easily or painlessly accomplished.

Colleges and universities as a rule don't respond readily to simple command and control. Smart leaders know they need to carefully build shared commitments to key goals, create the right incentives for faculty, and coordinate activities across systems to transform the aspiration of more student success into reality. It takes a lot of time and work to do well.

But change is definitely possible. We find examples of how leadership matters at places like Syracuse University, where a top-down commitment to improving graduation rates and other outcomes led to reforms at many different levels of the organization. Over the course of many conversations, institutional leaders told us again and again that their success was rooted in long-standing, deeply-held commitment to understanding their students and helping them succeed. Some high performing institutions actually had a difficult time singling out specific practices that promote graduation, because they'd been in place for so long. More than one told us, "That's just who we are."

Ultimately, leadership drives everything else: close attention to student engagement, strong commitment to undergraduate learning, pervasive use of data to improve, and many others. By making improved graduation rates a fundamental and enduring priority, higher education leaders can truly change things for the better.

Conclusion

The voices of high performing institutions presented in this paper should be taken for what they are, and no more: a beginning sense of why some colleges and universities believe they've been successful. There may very well be other reasons we've not captured, and there are surely many more voices that need to be heard. As large, expensive, and important as higher education is, many important facets are strangely under-examined. Far more extensive and rigorous research on graduation rates, both qualitative and quantitative, will be needed in the future.

But we also surely have enough knowledge and

evidence to get started on making real improvements right now. The basic contours of what institutions can do are clear. They need to work hard on connecting with their students, particularly in the freshman year. They need to make a genuine commitment to improving the quality of undergraduate teaching and learning, because success in the classroom and finishing a degree go hand in hand. They need to carefully monitor student progress, using their new capacity to collect and analyze data to better understand student success. And they need to make student success an unambiguous, institution-wide priority, driven from the top and pursued over the long term.

There is reason, we think, to be encouraged about growing attention to student success. After our first report on this issue, for example the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the National Association of System Heads agreed to join the Education Trust in an initiative to understand more about unusually high-performing institutions.

The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education is conducting a study of institutions that serve high concentrations of students from low-income families and have success graduating students.

And entire university systems, including California State University and the university systems of Georgia and Louisiana, have made improving graduation rates a priority.

The ideas and practices outlined in this paper reflect decades of research and undeniable real-world successes. Institutions that take these results seriously can make a huge difference in the lives of their students. Given the huge number of students who fail to graduate every year, there's no time to wait.

Endnotes:

1 For a detailed description of the factors and methodology used by College Results Online in identifying "similar" institutions, see the following: *One Step from the Finish Line: Higher College-Graduation Rates are Within Our Reach*. www.edtrust.org

2 http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/

3 National Survey of Student Engagement, unpublished analysis, 2002.

4 Vincent Tinto, "Taking Student Retention Seriously," Syracuse University. Among the academic studies the author cites with respect to the impact of expectations are J. Fleming, "Blacks in College," 1984; L. Rendon, "Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development," *Innovation in Higher Education* 19:33-52, 1994; and S. Hurtado and D. Faye Carter, "Latino students' sense of belonging in the college community: Rethinking the concept of integration on campus," in *Colleges Students: The Evolving Nature of Research,* 1996.

5 Vincent Tinto, "Linking Learning and Leaving: Exploring the Role of the College Classroom in Student Departure," *Reworking the Student Departure Puzzle,* John M. Braxton ed., 2000.

6 Basmate Parsand and Laurie Lewis, *Remedial Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions in Fall 2000,* U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003. The rate is higher in public schools – 21% --than in private institution, 12%.

7 For example, only 36% of 4-year students who have to take remedial reading courses earn a B.A. within eight years of high school graduation, compared to 76% of students who need no remedial coursework – National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS:88), calculations by Clifford Adelman, U.S. Department of Education, 2004.

8 Uri Treisman, "Studying students studying calculus: A look at the lives of minority mathematicians" *College MathematicsJournal, 23*, 1992.

9 As noted by researchers including Clifford Adelman, who found that the Bachelor's degree attainment rate of African-American and Latino students could be increased by at least one-third if we could graduate all of the students who entered post-secondary education and earned at least 60 post-secondary credits but didn't earn a degree within 8.5 years of graduating. (Clifford Adelman, *Principal Indicators of Student Academic Histories in Postsecondary Education, 1972-2000,* U.S. Department of Education, 2004, Table 3.1).

10 Vincent Tinto, "Taking Student Retention Seriously," Syracuse University.

Bringing "Dropouts" Back to College

By Robert A. Jones
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Photo courtesy of University of New Mexico

Arellana Cordero

An honors student in high school, Arellana Cordero entered the University of New Mexico in 1993 with high expectations of becoming a college graduate. Five years later, with only 15 credits remaining to receive her baccalaureate degree, she abandoned her goal and dropped out.

Cordero's problem was not low grades or a lack of money. Rather, she left because, after five years, her college career had gone astray. She lived at home, felt disconnected from the university and had begun to doubt she would ever receive a degree, however close it might be. So when outside pressures of a job and marriage began to tug at her life, she walked away from college.

At the University of New Mexico and many other public universities, more than half of each freshman class will fail to graduate. Traditionally, these departures have been attributed to academic failure or personal problems, and dropouts have been regarded as the unfortunate losers in the Darwinian struggle for a higher education.

But recent surveys here and elsewhere suggest that a surprisingly large percentage of dropouts more closely resemble Cordero. These students - especially those who leave in their junior or senior years-maintain at least decent grades and lead otherwise productive lives while in college. They depart because something more subtle goes wrong: They get lost on the path to a degree, can't reconcile competing pressures from jobs and families, and eventually surrender to the accumulated difficulties. The unraveling takes place slowly, ending not with a bang but a whimper.

Across the nation, little is done to rescue these students once they've left college. But an innovative project here at UNM is proving that many such dropouts can be enticed into returning for a second shot at a degree. And these students, once returned, are graduating at startling rates.

The Graduation Project, as it is called, is the

University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM

Undergrad enrollment	15,397
Pell Grant recipients	31.4%
Median SAT	1010
Gender	
Men	42.9%
Women	57.1%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	49.8%
African American	2.8%
Latino	33.6%
Native American	6.6%
Overall 6-year grad rate	41.6%

Source: College Results Online

brainchild of David E. Stuart, the university's former associate provost. Founded in 1996 with a tiny budget and tinier staff, the program has systematically tracked down nearly 1,800 departed students and lured them back to campus. Thus far, 64 percent – or more than 1,100 students – have earned their bachelor's degrees. In addition, 59 of the participants have gone on to graduate school or have earned a graduate degree.

Stuart, a burly 37-year veteran of the university who is also a professor of anthropology, says the high graduation rates prove that many of the myths about college dropouts are simply false.

"We find that many of these people are good students and motivated," he said. "They want that degree, and they will get it if given a decent chance."

Because of those myths, Stuart says many of his colleagues were dubious when he first proposed the program eight years ago. "I'm sure the administration was humoring me when they said OK,"

he explained. "They were thinking,

'Here's Dave Stuart being himself again, so we'll play along. The program won't be successful, and we'll let Dave find that out for himself.'".

That skepticism has long since evaporated. The university's regents recently asked Stuart to expand his efforts, applying the techniques of the Graduation Project to current students who are in danger of dropping out. And university President Louis Caldera says that the Graduation Project's practice of forging personal relationships with its student participants, a key feature of the program, is "something that we need to clone in other areas."

The Graduation Project has attracted attention not only because of its success but because it appears to be the first of its kind among the nation's public universities. In fact, when Stuart first began organizing the project in 1996 he searched for similar programs that could be used as models. He found none and soon realized he would be forced to invent the program piece by piece.

Stuart and senior program manager Danita Gomez decided they would seek only those dropouts who had earned 98 credit hours (128 are needed for graduation) and maintained a grade point average of 2.0 or better. The target group, in other words, would be composed of former students who were reasonably close to graduation and had left in good academic standing.

"Even with these cutoffs, we identified about 3,000 students that fit the model," said Stuart. "We were surprised to see the group had

an average GPA of 2.8, so clearly the students were not leaving for academic reasons."

The trick of locating long-gone students turned out to be simpler than expected. The university contracted with TransUnion Inc., a credit reporting company, to run their student names through the company's database.

Because of the potential credit impact of such searches, the university required the company to construct a firewall that would separate the student search operations from its normal activity.

The approach worked. Soon the university had addresses and phone numbers for virtually all of its targeted walkaways at a cost of $1.90 each.

Then came the delicate business of approaching the former students. The university decided the first communication would be made via letter. But what should the letter say?

Stuart decided to offer a re-entry that would be as hassle-free and low-cost as possible. The strategy was based on his interpretation of university surveys of departing students taken in the mid-'90s. Those surveys showed some surprising results. Many students walked away because they felt defeated by the university bureaucracy and its complex, often shifting graduation requirements.

Many of these respondents fell into the "non-traditional" category, meaning they worked full-time, were married or had children, and usually lived off-campus. On many state university campuses such students are now the norm rather than the exception. It was these students, Stuart found, who were being defeated by the university bureaucracy.

Incredibly, said Stuart, many reported they often could not identify which courses they needed to graduate. And, even if the

courses could be identified, the students frequently could not get into those classes because they were oversubscribed. "They were befuddled, rudderless," Stuart said. "They were saying, 'I don't know what it takes to get out of here and I'm tired of trying.' And maybe they'd been offered a raise at their job and decided, 'That's what I'm doing, I'm outta here.'"

So Stuart sat down to write his letter, in the belief that he had a fair understanding of the problems of the walkaway students. They needed to see a simple, direct path to a degree, and they needed a little help in getting there. He decided to offer them just that.

"We at the University of New Mexico care about the academic success of our students," the letter began. "If you are still interested in pursuing that dream, we would like to help."

The letter then detailed the enticements: a shortened re-admit application with no fee; a "degree summary" that would state exactly which courses were needed for graduation; priority enrollment in classes; and personal assistance when problems arose.

Then came the financial kicker. If returning students had an old GPA of at least 2.5, or achieved it after returning, they would be eligible for a special Tuition Assistance Program whereby the university would pay half their tuition per year, up to $800, over a two-year period.

The letter touched the right buttons, and in the weeks following, about 800 inquiries poured into the project office. Eventually 180 of those enrolled as returned students.

The project did not attempt to create a "class" of returnee students. Rather, the strategy was to help each student individually and speed them towards a degree as fast as

possible. One of the returnees was Linda Marmon.

She had left the university after getting married with only 24 credit hours remaining for a degree. Financial problems had dictated the departure, but she also felt stymied at the university. "Those 24 more hours had begun to seem huge," she said. "You know, this is a big university and it can be overwhelming. There is an intimidating quality about it. You're almost afraid to ask questions, and you don't know who to ask, anyway. So you get frustrated and you quit."

For Marmon, the Graduation Project made good on its promise to ease those frustrations. The atmosphere of the project office was personal rather than bureaucratic, and it was oriented toward problem-solving.

"They showed an interest in me," Marmon said. "They called me, they sent letters. Their message was, 'You can do this, and we will help you.'"

Marmon graduated in May 2003 and is so enthusiastic about the Graduation Project that she has become an informal recruiter with friends who have dropped out. "I tell them, 'If you need me to take you by the hand and introduce you to the people in the office, I'll do it.' That piece of paper (the diploma) is really important to me, and I've learned how much it can mean to someone's self-confidence."

Several of the Graduation Project participants have especially poignant stories. One young woman believed she had actually graduated when, in fact, she had received an "incomplete" in a single course necessary for a degree. When she applied for a job she listed herself as a UNM graduate. Her boss checked and could find no record of a degree.

She was about to be fired for

lying when she was contacted, coincidentally, by the Graduation Project. Staff members arranged for her to re-take the course and helped to smooth things over with the boss. She got her degree and kept her job.

In other cases -about 300, in fact - project participants have not actually attended classes at all. After entering the program, they discovered they had already satisfied all the requirements for a degree. Project staff members helped them move the paperwork through the bureaucracy, and they graduated.

The benefits of the program extend not only to the returned students but to the state as a whole, says university President Caldera. The difference in earning power between a high school graduate and a college graduate is dramatic, and higher wage earners pay higher taxes. In addition, he said, the state legislature in New Mexico is showing a renewed interest in getting the biggest bang for its education buck.

"The legislature wants to see a systematic increase in our six-year graduation rate. They've given us benchmarks, and some of our funding will be contingent on meeting those benchmarks," he said. "A program like the Graduation Project helps us along the road to meeting those goals."

Many public universities have initiated programs encouraging students to remain in school. Those attempts range from the creation of cohort groups among freshmen, to mentor programs and special advisers for students in trouble.

But few, if any, universities have imitated New Mexico's program of retrieving dropouts from the larger community. Nor have they adopted the Graduation Project's strategy of helping students cope with jobs, marriages and children

while they struggle their way towards a degree.

Stuart admits his frustration. "The problem of these kids trying to cope is national, and that is evident from the graduation rates," he said. "But I haven't been able to sell the idea. The conversation isn't being taken up at the large publics who are having versions of the same problem."

Stuart attributes the lack of interest to several factors, including the increasing focus on research at large public universities and the resulting lack of exposure among senior faculty to undergraduates. In addition, he says, there is "convenient denial" of the reality that many departing students are high-performing.

"If you don't admit that they can be good students, you don't have to take them seriously," he said.

Another factor may be the traditional mindset of college administrators. "Universities tend to focus on recruitment of good students as a way of ensuring academic success," said Jack Kay, associate provost at Wayne State University. "They're not in the habit of thinking about stop-outs or dropouts as a source of graduates."

But at UNM the enthusiasm for Stuart's approach remains high. At the request of the UNM regents, his office has begun to investigate whether its dropout strategy can be expanded to include current students who are in danger of leaving.

As the first stage, Stuart has proposed an analysis of hundreds of dropout transcripts to search for telltale academic patterns that preceded the decision to drop out. Already, an informal survey of transcripts has suggested that such patterns exist. Cynthia Stuart, David Stuart's wife and the dean of admissions at New Mexico, joined in the informal survey and described the results.

"You see a gradual process," she said. "It's not like you're looking at the transcript of a great student and then suddenly-boom-he's gone. You see the student taking some incompletes, cutting back his hours, the grades falling a notch. The student is reducing his involvement in the university. He is giving these signals long before he finally leaves, which means there's an opportunity to take corrective action."

If the early warning system succeeds, Cynthia Stuart says, the student's adviser could be notified in time to take that action and perhaps forestall the departure.

In the meantime, the Graduation Project itself continues to feed returned students back into the system. A recent group included Arellana Cordero, the honors student who dropped out needing only 15 credits to graduate.

After she left the university, Cordero began raising a family and built a real estate business in Albuquerque. By any standard measure, her life was successful. But the lack of a degree nagged at her.

"I have always been an overachiever type, and the idea that I never finished college just bothered me," she said. "But re-applying to UNM presented so many obstacles. Once I even thought of trying the University of Phoenix (a commercial institution that offers degrees through correspondence courses) and then thought, 'Naah, I can't do that.'"

When Cordero learned about the Graduation Project she was startled to learn that it seemed designed to solve the problems she was facing at UNM. She quickly enrolled and began taking the classes she needed for a degree. She graduated this summer.

What's next? "I plan to get my master's in business administration," she said, and laughed. "And right away, this time."

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About The Education Trust

The Education Trust, Inc. was created to promote high academic achievement for all students, at all levels—kindergarten through college. While we know that all schools and colleges could better serve their students, our work focuses on the schools and colleges most often left behind in plans to improve education: those serving African American, Latino, Native American and low-income students.

The Education Trust works side-by-side with policy makers, parents, education professionals, community and business leaders—in cities and towns across the country—who are trying to transform their schools and colleges into institutions that genuinely serve all students. We also bring lessons learned in local communities back to Washington to help inform national policy debates.

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