Student-Centered Support and Success

Background

SDSU’s first comprehensive student success plan was launched in fall 2010. It addressed the life span of an undergraduate student’s interactions and experiences with the university from pre-enrollment through graduation. The plan was built around programs managed by both Academic and Student Affairs.

During academic year 2014-2015, the 2010 model was updated based on research and best practices around student success. The model continues to guide student success programming across the institution and is organized into stages including: Connection (pre-enrollment), Acclimation (year 1), Alignment (years 2 and 3), Transition (year 4 and beyond) and Throughout the SDSU Experience. Since 2010, numerous current programs have been refreshed and expanded, along with the addition of new programs.

The primary outcome measures include enhanced student engagement, as measured through the National Survey of Student Engagement, first to second year retention which increased from 73.5% (fall 2010 to fall 2011) to 78.6% (fall 2015 to fall 2016), and six-year graduation rates which fluctuated over the past six years from a high of 59.7% for the fall 2005 cohort to a low of 53.5 % for the fall 2010 cohort. During this same period, the number of students in each cohort increased from 1,729 in fall 2005 to 2,111 in fall 2010.

In addition to the programs identified within the official Student Success plan, numerous programs help support students including the predictive analytics and early alert software platform, the Student Success Collaborative (SSC-Campus), and the President’s Wokini Initiative, which targets American Indian student success. The use of the risk model has also helped develop more customized advising and coordinated care for all students including underrepresented groups as defined by the University.

Lessons Learned

- **Importance of relationships.** The development of strong relationships across the institution for students, faculty, and staff are critical to sustaining excellence. Academic and Student Affairs need to work closely together to provide experiential learning opportunities putting classroom knowledge into relevant practice, increasing student marketability, and allowing students to find the connections that make a difference in their academic and social success.

- **The need for a comprehensive understanding and strategy of student success.** A successful model must incorporate numerous programs and approaches because “one size does not fit all.” Consideration must be given to the unique needs of underrepresented people in the development of programs and practices.

- **Traditional indicators of student success are retention, persistence, and graduation.** For the SDSU Student Success model, the primary outcomes are retention, completion, and selected factors from the NSSE. Are
there additional markers for student success which should be considered such as employability following graduation and measures related to overall student development, and general well-being (i.e. physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual components)?

- **Assessing the overall effectiveness of a comprehensive model is challenging.** While many of the programs identified within the current model have assessment plans, assessing the overall effectiveness is daunting, if not impossible. This is due to the context in which the model was launched as several programs were already in place, there was a lack of a pilot phase and little opportunity to compare groups of students. However, given recent budget cuts and re-direction, it is imperative to be able to answer questions about what programs work for which students and in what combination in order to prioritize the use of resources.

- **All programs in the model need an identified administrative home, leader and budget.** Student success does not happen on its own. For the SDSU model, no uniform leadership/management model exists. Communication of expectations for further development and leadership roles has not been clear. Some programs lack funding, adequate space and/or designated home department or unit.

- **Communication must be comprehensive and consistent between all units and to all students, faculty and staff.** As student success and support is one of the central missions of the university, a comprehensive rollout of the program is important but so is providing guidance for implementing the model throughout its duration. We are all working toward a common goal.

### National trends and external picture

Successful student success plans tend to focus on the following areas of impact (EAB 2017):

- **Retention, persistence, graduation** – These are the most traditional and publicly visible indicators of success across educational settings.

- **Academic progress and performance** – Includes moving through academic milestones as well as time to degree completion, grade point average, and overall course performance.

- **Student experience** – The degree to which students use support services and participate in activities, as well as overall student satisfaction.

- **Special populations** – Closing the achievement gap among underrepresented populations.

- **Tuition revenue** – Creating additional revenue by helping students return after leaving or retaining students and keeping them enrolled.

- **Staff productivity** – Use of technology and effectiveness of “lean” practices.

- **Employment after graduation** - Students with a degree but who are unable to secure employment due to lack of experience or other factors indicate a breakdown between the academic and professional setting.

An effective student success initiative at SDSU must also attend to:
• **Changing demographics** - Incoming students are much more diverse - racially and ethnically as well as in their level of preparedness for college level academics. Leadership development is a priority for traditionally underrepresented people, as well as a more comprehensive student profile that encompasses all aspects of individual backgrounds and experiences.

• **Affordability and accessibility** – With the costs of higher education rising, affordability is a concern for students. According to HERI, approximately 65% of first-year students in 2015 had some concern about paying for college. 25% of students graduating in 2016 reported owing at least $15,000 or more in student loans. Utilizing a high touch approach to students receiving financial aid may be a key to helping those students manage anxiety and debt and creating greater accessibility for traditionally underrepresented people.

• **Pathways to degree achievement** – Traditional aged students are coming to SDSU with increasing numbers of credits. Nationally, HERI reports that in 2015, 71.5% of students reported taking at least one AP exam; more than a quarter of students (28.3%) reported taking five or more exams (Eagan et al., 2016, p. 55). Looking at SDSU specifically, more than 500 first-year students have entered SDSU over the past few years with completed credits. Other alternative pathways include accelerated programs (such as SDSU’s Nursing and Economics programs), stackable credentials like certificate’s to bachelor’s, and competency-based programs.

• **Student well-being and mental health** – HERI reports the percentage of students who frequently feel depressed has steadily risen from 6.6% of students in 2010 to 11.9% in 2016. Additionally, the regularity of students feeling overwhelmed rose from 29.1% to 40.8% during the same period. Recommended counseling staff to student ratio is one staff member to every 1,000 to 1,500 students (International Association of Counseling Services IACS, 2007). SDSU maintains an approximate ratio of one staff to every 1,800 students. Additionally, more holistic perspectives and responsive programs should be considered for all students’ overall well-being. Examples include nutrition and wellness programs and financial well-being. Students must also be provided with a safe learning environment where their physical and emotional safety needs are met.

• **Quality teaching and the classroom experience** – Higher education needs to focus on the impact of high quality teaching. Effective techniques are well documented, and research shows the positive role the classroom experience has in all students’ persistence and graduation. University teaching centers, such as SDSU’s Center for Enhancement of Teaching & Learning, play an important role in this professional development and creating and promoting best practices for the education of all students.

• **High-impact educational practices** have been shown to have a positive impact on the student experience, benefiting all students. SDSU already delivers many of these practices, however it’s always useful to re-evaluate with a critical eye and to consider the unique needs and concerns of students from underrepresented populations.

• **First-year seminars and experiences** – Although the requirement for first-year seminar has been removed from SDSU’s curriculum, many departments are continuing to offer a first-year seminar course. SDSU offers numerous first-year experience initiatives. The establishment of special sections of FYS to meet the
unique needs of selected populations (i.e., Native American students; students who are veterans) is one approach to tailoring courses and experiences.

- **Common intellectual experiences** – a Common Read is a popular approach to providing a common intellectual experience for undergraduate students, used at SDSU since 2009. The majority of books selected have focused on themes related to diversity, inclusion and equity.

- **Learning communities** – the key outcome of these communities is to integrate learning across multiple courses, while asking big picture questions. Although SDSU has a variety of Living Learning Communities that attempt to deliver on this practice (at least partially), one could make the argument that our LLCs are not entirely at the same level as a fully fleshed out, highly impactful learning community.

- **Writing-intensive courses** – These courses focus on writing at all levels of instruction and across the curriculum.

- **Collaborative assignments and projects** – Approaches to this practice focus on two primary goals: working to solve problems in groups, and improving one’s ability to understand others with diverse backgrounds and experiences.

- **Student research** – The primary goal of this practice is to involve students in actively seeking information through consideration of contested questions, empirical observation, and cutting-edge technologies.

- **Diversity/global learning** – Emphasis on exploring cultures, different life experiences, and diverse world views is a key component. They often explore “difficult differences” such as various inequalities that exist both domestically and abroad. These experiences are often made more impactful by participating in experiential learning in the surrounding community, or participating in a study abroad program.

- **Service learning and community-based learning** – The primary instructional strategy with this practice delivers field-based experiential learning with partners in the surrounding community, giving “direct experience with issues” to all students who are studying in the classroom.

- **Internships** – Much like the above point, internships offer direct, hands-on, experiential learning opportunities, typically in a career relevant setting.

- **Capstone courses, thesis dissertations and projects** – Capstones courses and end of degree projects or products are an increasingly common and flexible way for students to apply and showcase the breadth of what they’ve learned throughout their collegiate experience. All undergraduate academic programs are required to include a capstone experience. Graduate programs vary regarding program deliverables, but most will conclude with an overarching program exemplar.

**Strategic Themes**

In the 2016 book “The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most,” the authors identify six key themes to rethinking current practices in student success and encouraging institutions to create an integrated, dynamic student experience. Several of the themes are relevant for graduate students as well as undergraduate students. They are:
1. **Learning matters.** Learning is at the heart of undergraduate and graduate education. “Focusing on learning for students, faculty, staff and administrators is the central work of effective colleges. The promotion of learning should be a guiding criterion for decision making at all levels.” (Felton, Gardner, Schroeder, Lambert, & Barefoot, 2016) Learning can be enhanced through new pedagogies, new curricula, by considering the varied experiences contributed by all students, and through technology. It extends beyond the classroom and includes co-curricular, experiential opportunities. High quality teaching is a key factor in college persistence and graduation. With the addition of the cross-curricular skills requirements within all undergraduate academic programs, SDSU will more intentionally focus on skills which serve to prepare all students to be successful. These skills include critical and creative thinking, information literacy, teamwork, problem solving, civic engagement, ethical reasoning, and diversity, inclusion and equity.

2. **Relationships matter.** Relationships are central to the learning process. Students establish relationships with other students, with faculty and staff members. Such relationships provide support and a sense of belonging to students from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. In addition, relationships between offices and units on- and off-campus are critical in building an overall culture of student support and success for all students.

3. **Expectations matter.** Institutions of higher education must clearly communicate high expectations for student engagement, achievement and growth. Students are expected to demonstrate a commitment to their education, while the institution provides programs and practices that support their efforts. At SDSU’s New Student Orientation, student commitment and excellence are emphasized repeatedly.

4. **Alignment matters.** The institution must ensure that policies, procedures, and processes are aligned so as to provide a more integrated and seamless experience for students. Increased use and integration of the Student Success Collaborative – Campus platform is one strategy to help ensure on-going communication and alignment between offices and units across campus.

5. **Improvement matters.** The institution is committed to continuous improvement, thus modeling for students that reflection on and assessment/evaluation of current practices is expected of everyone. A few of the indicators of the commitment to on-going improvement is the re-accreditation process through the Higher Learning Commission, the SDSU Assessment Academy and the on-going review of the Student Success model with a focus on best practices for fostering increased diversity and inclusion.

6. **Leadership matters.** To meet the needs of students, a collaborative leadership model is needed so that people throughout the institution who come from various backgrounds and experiences see themselves as part of a leadership team. At an effective institution, leadership is collaborative and all people throughout the institution see themselves as part of a leadership team.

**Options**
In regard to the future of SDSU’s approach to student-centered success and support, numerous decision points can be identified including:

- Student Success Model - Continue to use the current SDSU Student Success model, or, develop a slightly revised or significantly new model. Also consider to what degree to incorporate or design stand-alone models for special populations of all students like transfer, graduate, returning adult, and online.
- Professional Advising Model – to what degree does SDSU want to adopt the model?
- Degree of centralization of student support and success services to provide access for all students.
- Array of programs – identification of programs to terminate, modify or increase and new programs to implement using a data-driven approach that gives consideration to both students who are traditionally well represented and those from backgrounds who are not, where the numbers may be smaller, yet serve a critical purpose.
- How to accurately characterize/describe SDSU students (i.e., the need to include categories for transgender and gender non-conforming applicants)
- Technology – Capacity must be adequate and accessible to meet the needs of all students and allow the university to remain up-to-date and fluid in adapting to innovations.

Projected costs

Significant investments in personnel, space, and operations have been made to support student success at SDSU. With an understanding that no new dollars will be allocated, re-allocation of existing resources will be needed to support new program development and service expansion.

Short-and long-term plans

- Ensure appropriate resource allocation to support student success for all students at SDSU; re-allocate resources as needed to align with strategic priorities as related to student success; identify possible sources of grant or SDSU Foundation funds to support programs.
- Fully embrace the Student Success Collaborative-Campus as a comprehensive tool to support student success. Focus on customized and coordinated care.
- Prioritize student success programs based on data on effectiveness and serving both traditional and underrepresented populations.
- Increase scholarship funds particularly for needs-based populations.

References


“Redefining Student Success, “EAB: Student Success Collaborative @ eab.com/redefining success (2017) this line needs to be indented.