Best Practices  
Book Review: *Student Success in College, Creating Conditions that Matter* by George D. Kuh et al.

Colleges and universities are struggling to improve graduation rates and help students achieve their educational goals. Four year colleges graduate only about 50% of students within 6 years while community colleges have a 39% completion rate. This book is a summary of recommendations based on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Documenting Effective Educational Practice project (DEEP). This project examined the practices of 20 colleges and universities that performed well on measures of student engagement on the NSSE as well as had better than predicted graduation rates (over 50%). The findings can provide some guidance for colleges seeking to implement best practices for student success.

**Student Engagement**

The best predictors of graduation are academic preparation and motivation (p. 7). However, many of our students are lacking in these areas. It was noted that student engagement is a key to student success, especially for students lacking preparation and motivation. Student engagement has two important components, including the amount of time and effort students invest in their studies and learning opportunities and services designed to engage students in learning.

**Summary of Best Practices**

Based on the DEEP study and other current research on educational effectiveness, the following conditions are important best practices: (p. xi)

* Adequate student time on task
* Balancing academic challenge with support for students
* Emphasis on early months and first year of study
* Respect for diverse talents and cultural differences
* Integration of prior learning and experience
* Ongoing practice of learned skills
* Active learning
* Assessment and feedback
* Collaboration among students
* Out-of-class contact with faculty

**Effective Practices at DEEP Colleges and Universities**

Student Success in College focuses and these key areas for institutional effectiveness and student success:

**Effective institutions have a clear, focused institutional mission.**

The mission is a statement of philosophy, aspirations, values, purposes, and traditions that is a guide for action. It is important that this mission include a commitment to student success.

**It is important to focus on student learning as opposed to teaching.**

There has been a shift from an emphasis on teaching to an emphasis on learning. This new emphasis on learning includes active and collaborative learning, using new electronic technologies, problem solving, group projects, peer tutoring, service learning, and internships. These new pedagogies help students practice what they are learning, develop leadership skills, prepare for the future world of work, and learn to work with diverse people.

Effective institutions place a high value on quality teaching and professional development. People within the institution have a passion for helping students develop their potential and are knowledgeable about student engagement.

Effective colleges and universities make time for students and provide prompt feedback. Students participate in activities, ask questions, and use faculty office hours. Faculty provide feedback about strengths and areas that need improvement.

Colleges can provide environments that are adapted for student enrichment and engagement such as spaces for discussion and group work.

**It is helpful to create clear pathways to student success.**

Creating a clear pathway to success is especially important for underrepresented students and those whose parents have not attended college. Students need to know what to expect and how to be successful. Clear pathways include a welcome to the college, orientation programs, how to find student services and other resources, programs for first-year students, and formal groups for supporting underrepresented students. Summer transition programs are especially helpful for underrepresented students. It is important to provide activities to help students meet their peers and connect to the institution.

One of the most important services is advising which is especially important for student success and improves completion rates.

Other important components are early warning systems that provide early assistance for students experiencing problems.

**High performing institutions are improvement-oriented.**

These college monitor present performance and set goals for improvement. They constantly work toward positive change and value innovation. The goal is to be the best they can be.

**There is a shared responsibility for educational quality and student success.**

No single office, individual, or college division is responsible for student success; it is a shared responsibility. Effective institutions have effective leaders and diverse faculty and staff. Student services work in partnership with academic affairs to assure student success.

Faculty help students to assume responsibility for their own learning. Students do classroom presentations and tutor or assist other students outside the classroom. Students participate in campus governance.

**Here are some important components of educational quality leading to student success:**

**Level of Academic Challenge**

Successful practices include academic rigor including the requirement to spend time preparing for classes, reading assignments, and writing reports. It includes critical thinking which involves analyzing, synthesizing, applying theories, and making judgements. The key to success is both academic challenge and appropriate support to achieve the desired outcomes. Support can include required study groups, meetings with faculty and advisers, workshops, tutoring, and assistance with writing.

When faculty have high expectations of students, students generally meet the challenge. Most first-year experience programs help students adapt to these higher levels of expectations, especially the increased emphasis on reading and writing.

**Active and Collaborative Learning**

Students practice what they are learning by working in groups, solving problems, asking questions in class, group projects, peer evaluation, learning communities, tutoring other students, participating in service learning, and active discussion of classroom materials.

Faculty are encouraged to present material in multiple ways. For example, project or portfolio based learning helps students utilize many diverse ways of learning. In this way, students are required to learn and then demonstrate what they have learned. Students learn that they are active rather than passive learners.

**Student and Faculty Interaction**

Effective institutions foster many kinds of student and faculty interactions including discussing career plans with an adviser, faculty mentors, classroom interaction, feedback from faculty on student performance, participating in student activities, involvement in committees, and engaging is campus governance. Appropriate space needs to be provided for these activities.

Technology is providing newer ways to enhance interaction through the use of course management systems such as Blackboard or Canvas.

**Enriching Educational Experiences**

College campuses provide the opportunity to interact with people of different races, ethnicities, religions, socio-economic level, and political beliefs. These experiences help students to work in a diverse environment after graduation. Community service and service learning projects provide students with valuable experience and leadership opportunities that can enhance employment prospects after graduation. Internships provide additional experiences that can lead to employment after graduation.

**Supportive Classroom Environment**

Students are more successful when they have adequate support to achieve their goals. Support can include the traditional student services, accessible faculty and staff, transition programs, first-year experience seminars, peer mentors, and early warning systems.

**Summary**

The ideas in this book provide a roadmap or checklist of ideas that colleges and universities can implement to improve institutional effectiveness and student success. Some of these ideas are familiar and common on most college campuses, but they are a comprehensive roadmap for improvement.

Notes:

George D. Kuh et al., *Student Success in College, Creating Conditions that Matter*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2010).