Over the past 20 years, if not more, colleges and universities, states and private foundations have invested considerable resources in the development and implementation of a range of programs to increase college completion. Though several of these have achieved some degree of success, most have not made a significant impact on college completion rates.

This is the case because most efforts to improve college completion, such as learning centers and first-year seminars, sit at the margins of the classroom and do not substantially improve students' classroom experience. Lest we forget, many students, certainly those in community college, commute to college and work and/or attend part-time. For them, if not for most students, the classroom is one, and perhaps the only, place where they meet with faculty and other students and engage in learning activities. Their success in college is built upon classroom success, one class and one course at a time. If our efforts do not reach into the classroom and enhance student classroom success, they are unlikely to substantially impact college success.

How then should colleges proceed? First and foremost they must direct their actions to the classroom, especially for those in the first year, and construct classrooms whose attributes are such as to enhance the likelihood that students will succeed academically.

Attributes of Effective Classrooms

What are the attributes of such classrooms? Generally speaking, they can be described by the terms expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement. Unlike the attributes of students, these are within the grasp of institutions to modify if they are serious about enhancing student success.

Expectations

Student classroom performance is driven, in part, by the expectations that faculty have for their students and that students have for themselves. Student success is directly influenced not only by the clarity and consistency of expectations, but also by their level. High expectations are a condition for student success; low expectations a harbinger of failure. Simply put, no one rises to low expectations. A faculty member’s expectations are communicated to students, sometimes implicitly, through syllabuses, assignments, grading metrics, course management sites, and conversations. Students quickly pick up what is expected of them in the classroom and adjust their behaviors accordingly. In this regard it is telling that evidence from the National Survey of Student Engagement indicate that the expectations of beginning college students for the amount of work required for classroom success declines over the course of the first year.

Support

It is one thing to hold high expectations; it is another to provide the support students need to achieve them. At no time is support, in particular academic support, more important than during
the critical first year of college when student success is still so much in question and still malleable to institutional intervention. A key feature of such support is its being aligned or contextualized to the demands of the classroom, thereby enabling students to more easily translate the support they receive into success in the classroom. As applied to basic skills for instance contextualization creates explicit connections between the teaching of reading, writing, or mathematics on one hand and instruction in a subject area on the other, as might occur when writing skills are taught with direct reference to material taught in a sociology class.

**Assessment and Feedback**

Students are more likely to succeed in classrooms that assess their performance and provide frequent feedback about their performance in ways that enable everyone -- students, faculty, and staff -- to adjust their behaviors to better promote student success in the classroom. Classroom assessment of student performance is particular effective when it is early and is used to trigger to provision of academic support to those whose performance indicates the need for support. This is especially true during the first year when students are trying to adjust their behaviors to the new academic and social demands of college life.

**Involvement**

A fourth, and perhaps the most important, attribute of effective classrooms is involvement, or what is now commonly referred to as engagement. Simply put, the more students are academically and socially engaged with faculty, staff, and peers, especially in classroom activities, the more likely they are to succeed in the classroom. Such engagements lead not only to social affiliations and the social and emotional support they provide, but also to greater involvement in learning activities and the learning they produce. Both lead to success in the classroom. As with assessment and feedback, involvement is particularly important early in the semester, as it helps to establish a pattern of student behaviors that further enhances student effort throughout the semester.

**Efforts to Enhance Classroom Effectiveness**

Though they are still limited in scope, there are now a number of efforts to reshape the classroom by altering the way academic support is provided, improving the usability of assessment and feedback techniques, and restructuring patterns of student engagement in the curriculum and classroom. Several of these deserve special attention, not only because of evidence that supports their effectiveness, but also because of their capacity to reshape the nature of classroom learning, and in turn enhance classroom success -- in particular, but not only, for those who enter college academically underprepared.

**Contextualized Academic Support**

Contextualized support can be achieved in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most common is that where study groups are directly connected to a specific course, as they are in supplemental instruction.
In this case, leaders of the study groups work closely with the course instructor to ensure that the work of the group is closely aligned to the demands of the course. The result is that courses to which such groups are linked typically have higher average grades, if only because there are many fewer low grades. For some students who are just below college-level work, accelerated learning programs that link a college-level course to a study or basic skills course yield similar results.

These programs, such as the one at the Community College of Baltimore County, challenge the conventional assumption that basic skill instruction should precede the beginning of college-level work.

For other students who require additional academic skills, learning communities, such as those at the City University of New York's LaGuardia Community College, are being used to connect one or more basic skills or developmental courses, such as writing, to other content courses, such as history, in which the students are also registered. In other cases, they may include a student success or counseling course. In this and other ways, learning communities provide a structure that enables the institution to align its academic and social support for basic skills students in ways that allow students to obtain needed support, acquire basic skills, and learn content at the same time.

Contextualization can also occur through the integration of academic support within the classroom. The Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges developed the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) initiative that enables students in technical and vocational courses to get academic support from basic skills instructors while earning credit toward a certificate or degree. This is achieved through the collaboration of basic skills instructors and faculty who jointly design and teach college-level technical and vocational courses. As a result, students learn basic skills and program content at the same time from a team of faculty. The result is that I-Best students fare better on a variety of outcomes (e.g., credits earned, completion of workforce training) when compared with traditional students at the same proficiency level.

Automating Classroom Assessment, Feedback, and Early Warning

There are a variety of assessment techniques that can be used to assess student learning and trigger academic intervention when necessary. Classroom assessment techniques like the “one-minute” paper and the “muddiest point” described by Angelo and Cross have been in practice for decades. So are early warning systems that employ information on student performance to trigger intervention.

What is new is the availability of technologies that allow faculty to easily capture and analyze more and different data in ways that can provide a clearer view into student learning and automate previously time-consuming tasks whose effort often stymied efforts at wide adoption. The Signals project at Purdue University, for instance, employs predictive modeling and data mining of student performance on mini-exams and patterns of utilization of course materials on a web-based platform to identify students who are “at risk” of doing poorly in a course. Once these students are identified, the system sends alerts to faculty and then emails the students urging
them to seek help via available resources such as office hours, study materials, and various academic support services. Though employed throughout the university, it has proven most effective for students in their first two years of coursework.

**Promoting Classroom Engagement**

Faculty are moving not only to change the manner in which students experience the curriculum, as they do in learning communities, but also the way they experience learning. They do so by employing pedagogies of engagement, such as cooperative learning and problem or project-based learning, that require students to work together in some form of collaborative groups and become active, indeed responsible, for the learning of the group and classroom peers. In this way, students share not only the experience of the curriculum, but also of learning within the curriculum.

By asking students to construct knowledge together, as they do at the University of Delaware and North Essex Community College, such pedagogies involve students both socially and intellectually in ways that promote cognitive and social development as well as an appreciation for the many ways in which one's own knowing is enhanced when other voices are part of that learning experience. As importantly, they enhance student effort and the heightened learning that follows.

**Building Effective Classrooms: Enhancing Faculty Skills**

These strategies, especially those that employ pedagogies of engagement to enhance student classroom success, ultimately depend on the skills of the faculty to effectively implement them in class. Yet the faculty who teach those classes, unlike those who teach in primary and secondary schools, are often not trained to teach their students. This is not to say that there are not many talented college faculty who bring considerable skills to the task of teaching students. There are. Rather college faculty are not, generally speaking, trained in pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment in ways that would enable them to be more effective in promoting the success of their students in the classrooms they teach, in particular but not only those who are academically underprepared.

Of course, colleges are not blind to the issue of faculty skills. For years they have invested in faculty development programs. Yet for all that investment, little change is apparent, if only because most programs are not well-conceived, are voluntary in nature, and/or attract a small segment of the faculty. Fortunately, this is beginning to change at a limited but growing number of colleges, such as Chandler-Gilbert Community College, Richland College, and Foothill College.

These institutions have established faculty development programs that require all new faculty to be part of a two-year or longer series of activities in which faculty, working together in what amounts to a faculty learning community, acquire pedagogical, curricular, and assessment skills appropriate to the needs of community college students, in particular those who require basic skills instruction.
Closing Comment

Efforts to increase student success in college are not new. But most have not penetrated the classroom. Even when successful, they have been isolated, sometimes idiosyncratic, and often of limited duration. If we are serious in our efforts to enhance college success, much must change. Our students deserve no less. Our nation requires no less. It is time to take the classroom seriously.

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