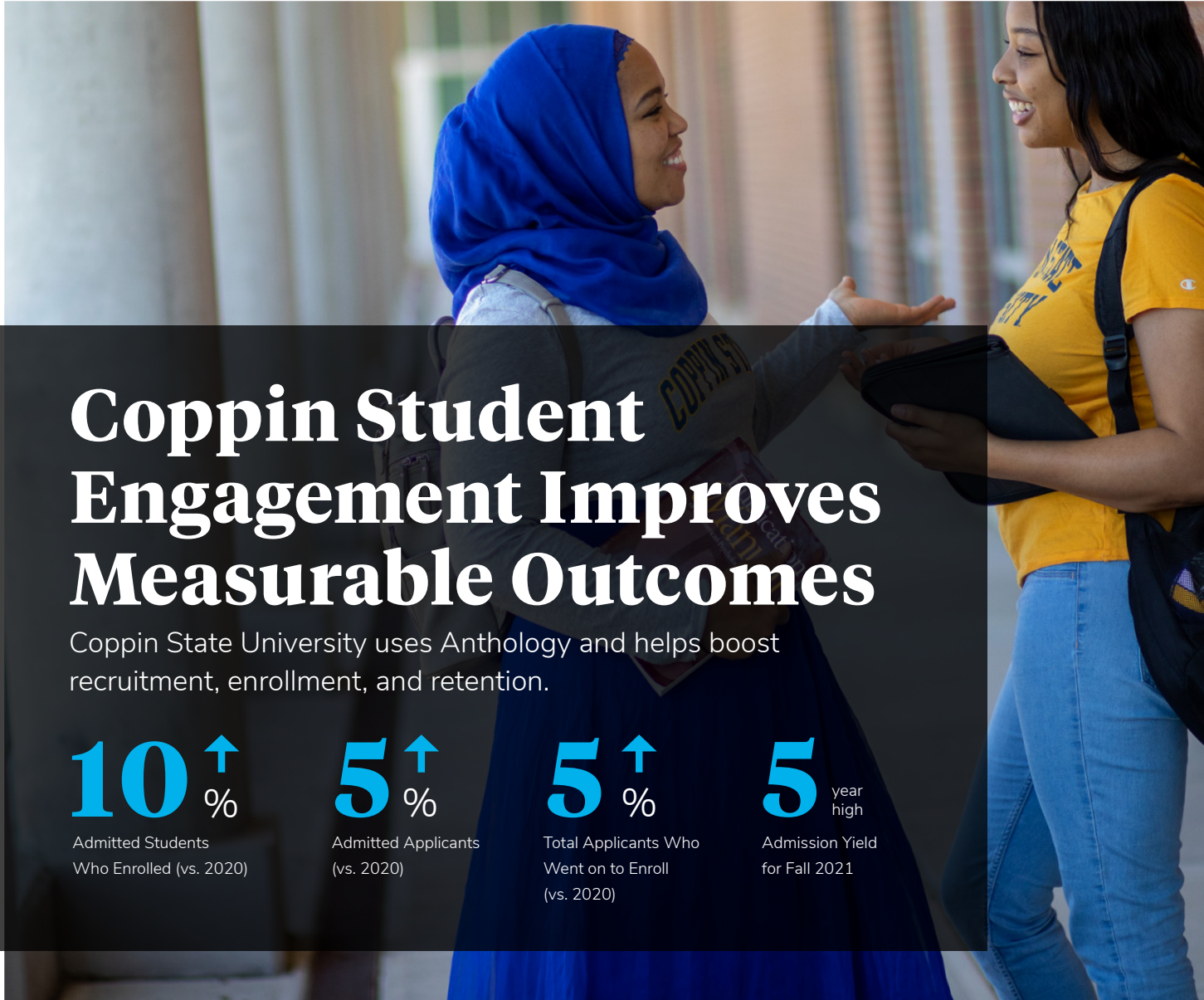


Student Success for Everyone: Serving the Underserved

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Introduction

Student success is increasingly embraced as a goal by all colleges and universities. That's a notable change from a few years ago, when student success was largely the focus only of institutions serving disadvantaged or at-risk students. These days, institutions of all kinds -- with high and low graduation rates -- ask themselves how they can get more students to the finish line.

The articles in this compilation explore how different kinds of institutions are focusing on this issue through changes in student services, policies on courses students take and the curriculum.

Inside Higher Ed will continue to track these issues. We welcome your thoughts on this compilation and future coverage.

–The Editors

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A Leg Up for Diverse Adult Learners

A new initiative will focus on developing adult-friendly pathways at predominantly and historically Black community colleges to increase their completion rates.

By [Sara Weissman](#) // September 7, 2021

Complete College America, an advocacy organization focused on closing equity gaps in graduation rates, recently launched a new initiative to boost college completion for adult learners at predominantly and historically Black community colleges.

The two-year project will work with a cohort of 25 to 30 institutions to assess how they serve adult students of color and to develop well-designed pathways to credentials that increase their earnings. The initiative seeks to address long-standing inequities and obstacles faced by adult learners of color on their paths to graduation, amid a pandemic that highlighted the distinct role of community colleges in meeting local workforce needs. It also comes at a time of renewed urgency to address the social and economic inequities highlighted during the national racial reckoning that began in summer 2020 after the police killing of George Floyd.

Cynthia Anthony, president of Lawson State Community College, a historically Black institution in Alabama, said adult students are highly motivated but can have long, winding roads to earning degrees because of the extra work and family responsibilities they have in their



ADAMKAZ/E+/GETTY IMAGES

lives. Many have full-time jobs and children.

“They may stop out, and then they have to come back and restart, stop out again and come back and pick up where they left off,” she said. “We know that we have to be focused and we have to be intentional in order for us to increase the graduation rates and the success rates of this population.”

The median age of a community college student is 24 years old, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics. More than a third of community college students [are between](#) the ages of 22 and 39, and about 8 percent are at least 40 years old. Adult

learners of color [lag behind](#) their white peers in attaining degrees, a 2021 report by the Community College Research Center found.

The report says 42 percent of Black Americans, 58 percent of Latinx Americans and 50 percent of Native Americans age 25 and over never advanced beyond a high school degree, compared to 31 percent of their white counterparts. Meanwhile, 42 percent of white adults earned a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 27 percent of Black Americans and 19 percent of Latinx and Native Americans.

“In community colleges in particular, the traditional student is maybe what we'd think of 10 years ago as a

A Leg Up for Diverse Adult Learners (cont.)

nontraditional student,” said California Community Colleges chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley, who is temporarily on leave working for the Biden administration. “We are the most obvious choice for working adults. They don’t have to apply; they don’t have to worry about what’s on their transcripts. They have an opportunity to select a program to study and jump in. I see our colleges as the most important system for this demographic of learner.”

The initiative is one step toward a goal set by the Lumina Foundation, which is funding the effort with a \$1 million grant, to ensure 60 percent of adults hold quality credentials by 2025. Amber Garrison Duncan, the foundation’s strategy director for student success at community colleges, said a driving question behind this project was “Where are Black, Latino and Native American students learning in the community college sector?”

Duncan noted an [analysis by Complete College America](#) found that 12 public historically Black community colleges and about 20 predominantly Black community colleges in the United States enroll 10 percent of all Black community college students nationally.

Kayla C. Elliott, director of higher education policy at the Education Trust, also emphasized that this small group of institutions has an outsize impact on success metrics for students of color. She wrote a [2019 report](#) on historically Black community colleges that notes the dearth of academic literature about these institutions. The research that does exist suggests that grad-



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uation and transfer rates at these institutions are on par with, if not better than, their community college peers, according to her report.

“Predominantly and historically Black community colleges by design and federal designation overproduce and overenroll and do more than their fair share in educating Black students,” Elliott said. They’re simultaneously underresourced “twofold” as both community colleges and historically and predominantly Black institutions. “This opportunity, any opportunity, to invest more in their capacity to serve their students is worthwhile and will advance equity in completion and attainment for students in those states.”

Colleges chosen to participate in the initiative will collect relevant data over the next month, including adult student enrollment and completion rates and continuation rates, and the number of adult learners who move into associate degree programs after earning other credentials. Complete College

America will then work with the colleges to set goals and choose strategies they want to implement in response to institution-level data.

“This is not intended to be a top-down initiative,” Duncan said. “This is intended to be of and with community.”

Colleges will examine barriers to success for adult learners at each institution, whether that’s childcare responsibilities, the structure of course schedules or when advising appointments are offered, said Nia Woods Haydel, vice president for alliance engagement and institutional transformation at Complete College America. She believes the key to adult-friendly programs is “flexibility.”

“Higher education in general is really traditional and sometimes rigid in scheduling, so making sure there’s flexibility in the way we offer classes, when we offer them, how we offer them, I think, is important,” she said.

The initiative will especially focus

A Leg Up for Diverse Adult Learners (cont.)

on creating pathways to degrees with stackable credentials, such as certificates, embedded along the way so adults gain more earning potential even before they graduate -- but not just any credentials -- “credentials of value,” Haydel added. “We mean credentials that will lead to social and economic mobility, upward mobility.”

Duncan pointed out that adult learners at most community colleges are concentrated in noncredit programs, but this model allows them to pursue an associate degree at the same time as noncredit credentials. She believes this could be a particularly fruitful approach during the pandemic.

“Especially in this moment where we’re trying to get into an economic recovery, folks need to upskill or re-skill quickly just to get into the labor market or get a pay increase ... but they don’t want to stop learning,” she said.

A community college degree can make a major difference for students’ future wages. The average community college student who graduates with an associate degree [earns \\$5,400 more](#) each year of employment than a student who drops out, according to research from the Community College Research Center.

Anthony, the Lawson State president, said she expects the long-term effects of investing in adult learners of color to be “very far-reaching” as more graduates from minority communities use their credentials to secure better-paying jobs, move into the middle class and accu-



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mulate wealth. She noted that, in a typical year, between 35 and 40 percent of the over 3,500 students enrolled at Lawson State are age 24 and above.

“We are not only impacting the students that we’re serving now, the communities that we’re serving now, and the workforce that we’re serving now, but we are changing generations to come,” she said. She believes “five years, 10 years, 25 years down the line we will still be realizing the benefits of the investments that have been made in community colleges.”

The pandemic “elevated” the national attention paid to community colleges and workforce development, because the public health crisis “amplified the gaps” between employees with and without degrees, said Chandra Scott, executive director of Alabama Possible, a statewide nonprofit organization focused on college access. She pointed out that workers without degrees were more vulnerable to layoffs and more likely to be in in-

dustries that could not pivot online.

Oakley said he sees more employers [offering tuition assistance](#) to help adult students pursue credentials and more institutions exploring competency-based models and flexible course schedules in the hopes of an “equitable recovery” from the pandemic. He also noted that some states are seeing declines in the number of traditional-age students, and as a result, colleges are working to recruit and retain more adult workers as an enrollment strategy.

Scott also believes a renewed national focus on racial justice has garnered new interest in how predominantly and historically Black community colleges can serve adult students and create a diverse workforce pipeline. Her state has eight of these institutions.

They weren’t “always on the top of the list as the first institutions to think of when business industries would say, ‘What institution can I go to, to partner with, to get highly

A Leg Up for Diverse Adult Learners (cont.)

qualified workers into my company?" she said. "I think now because there's such a shift around racial inequities that the intention is there more than before."

The goal of the Complete College America initiative is not only to work alongside colleges to make changes to support adults but to form a broader network for predominantly and historically Black community colleges to connect and continue to work together. The initiative will also highlight the strategies colleges already use to serve adult learners of color and offer a platform for scholars at these institutions to share their research and best practices.

These institutions remain "largely unheard-of," Haydel said. "We don't hear a lot about the work that they

do, the impact they have, and so this project provides the opportunity to really focus on a sector that has largely been left behind and not included in the conversation around college completion."

Haydel noted that four-year HBCUs have organizations created specifically to represent them. The United Negro College Fund supports private HBCUs and the Thurgood Marshall College Fund supports public HBCUs, but community colleges, while sometimes served by these organizations, lack a network specifically for them.

Complete College America will have an online platform where it will publish research about adult learners at these colleges gathered over the course of the initiative and feature relevant work by fac-

ulty members at these institutions. The group also plans to host virtual -- and eventually in-person -- convenings for college leaders, which will likely include meetings for "communities of practice," colleges working on similar strategies and regional groups for colleges in the same state, Haydel said.

Two years from now, "I hope that we have degree programs that meet the needs of adult students so that they are organized in a way, structured in a way, where students can see success at the end," she said. She also wants to see a "robust and thriving community" of leaders at predominantly and historically Black community colleges, "one that the outside world can see and draw from as a resource to advance college completion efforts nationally." ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/09/07/supporting-adults-historically-black-community-colleges>

Stepping Out From COVID

Three ways campus leaders and educators can help college students get back on track after the challenges of learning within the confines of the pandemic.

By **Melissa Ezarik** // June 23, 2021

Although higher ed leaders feel immense pride about how their teams pivoted to virtual everything practically overnight when the pandemic hit, students are in much less agreement on that point. “This last year in my opinion was a lot of money for almost no actual learning,” wrote one respondent to the latest [Student Voice survey](#) of 2,000 college students, while others shared similar sentiments.

Conducted by *Inside Higher Ed* and *College Pulse* from May 23 to 27, and presented by Kaplan, the survey explored how students believe the pandemic affected their academic progress and overall success in college.

Asked to rate the value of the education they received over the past year, 44 percent of students felt it was very good or good. But only 7 percent rated it as excellent, and nearly three times as many rated it as poor. Men and students who are nonbinary in gender were much more likely than women to slap down a poor rating (23 percent each, compared to 15 percent of women).

“We need to not disregard what students are telling us in this moment,” says David Graham, assistant vice provost in the Office of Student Academic Success Transition and Academic Growth at Ohio State



AARON HAWKINS/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES PLUS

University. “Before the pandemic, there was a value proposition of higher education being questioned, and the pandemic only accelerated or amplified that question. We as administrators need to listen to our students about their perceptions and expectations.”

Colleges “went 180 degrees in March” of last year, he adds, and moving forward must involve continuing to “redesign and reimagine higher education” to meet student needs.

In a National Association of College Stores student survey conducted a few months into the pandemic, less than half of students said they had been asked to provide feedback yet to their institutions about the switch

to online, explains Brittany Conley, a research analyst with NACS’s On-Campus Research division. “I don’t think you can design something to work with students if you have not gotten input from them,” she says.

The Student Voice survey asked about institutional services that helped with learning during COVID, and more than one-third of respondents said that none of the listed items did. One-third of students found academic advising useful, and one-quarter found tutoring helpful. Only 17 percent felt that career services had contributed to having a more successful academic year.

As administrators and faculty members look toward opening campuses up more fully this fall,

Stepping Out From COVID (cont.)

the survey results point toward actions that could help get students back on track after three semesters impacted by COVID.

1. Support on-time graduation goals.

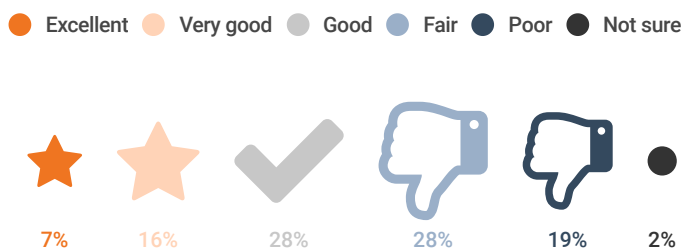
Nearly one-quarter of students surveyed believe (somewhat or strongly) that the pandemic will result in a later graduation date. Those at two-year colleges and those at public colleges are more likely than those at four-year and private institutions to indicate that delayed graduation is at least somewhat likely.

Officials at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville have asked academic departments to examine ways to be flexible about requirements, such as eliminating study abroad mandates for particular programs, says Chancellor Donde Plowman. Other institutions are examining course requirements. One survey respondent at a public university, noting that “time is money,” made an argument for eliminating classes not crucial to one’s major. “Being a ‘well-rounded student’ is not a valid reason to continue with this way of education,” the student wrote.

The president of Complete College America, which has long called for states and institutions to examine policies that are impediments to graduation, says the pandemic has highlighted why such actions make sense. “We’ve been saying, ‘Let’s identify policies you abandoned in the temporary sense and think about how to hold on to [the changes] in the long term,’” says Yolanda Watson Spiva. “Thinking about

Rating the Value of Education

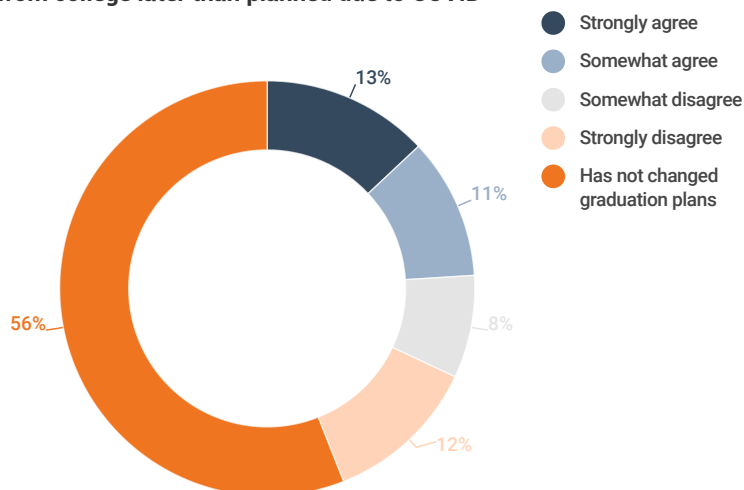
Students asked to rate the value of the college education they received in 2020-21



Source: *Inside Higher Ed* / College Pulse survey of 2,000 college students; explore the data [here](#). Presented by: Kaplan

The Pandemic's Impact on Graduation Timing

Students were asked how much they agree that they will graduate from college later than planned due to COVID



Source: *Inside Higher Ed* / College Pulse survey of 2,000 college students; explore the data [here](#). Presented by: Kaplan

campuses, I can imagine there being 20- to 50-year-old policies.”

Changes made after a policy audit might, for example, allow staff to be more flexible about the ramifications of holds on student accounts, such as those that impede the ability to register for the next semester or get a transcript. “Everybody has been in fight-or-flight mode,” says

Watson Spiva, so colleges haven’t prioritized policy change. But as the country comes back from the pandemic, she has seen more willingness.

She’d like to see more attention placed on remedial noncredit courses, with colleges moving toward co-requisite courses for students entering college who need

Stepping Out From COVID (cont.)

more basic knowledge of a subject. “How do students maintain momentum while in college? It’s by being in college-track courses,” she says.

As Graham points out, “you can have as much empathy as you like, but if the policies don’t support your empathy, it’s hard.” Ohio State is looking at how its systems can work with students in crisis, he adds. “Not that we can’t chew gum and jump rope at the same time, but it’s been an exhausting year, and everyone was operating outside of their element.”

Watson Spiva would also like to see colleges offer more terms, such as during breaks, so that students can catch up on credits. And to manage challenges in offering required courses more frequently so students can take them, she suggests partnering with other colleges. A student might take a virtual class through that institution but earn credit at the home institution.

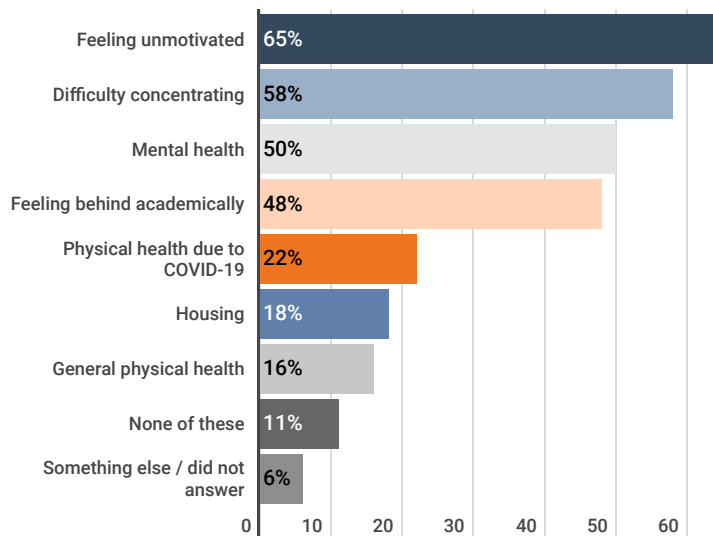
2. Anticipate new and more intense student needs.

Students’ primary concerns for fall are centered around motivation and concentration, with mental health concerns also significant. Nearly one-quarter of students have lingering concerns about COVID-19.

“I think motivation is a bigger issue than we have faced in the past, and we’re becoming more aware of how important that motivation and engagement is,” says Barbara Means, executive director of the nonprofit education-focused organization Digital Promise. She anticipates motivational issues less-

Academic Concerns About the Approaching Year

What college students say their concerns are regarding the ability to complete coursework and get good grades in the 2021-22 academic year



Source: *Inside Higher Ed* / College Pulse survey of 2,000 college students; explore the data [here](#). Presented by: Kaplan

ening in the fall for most students but not disappearing, especially if the teaching is not engaging or the content is difficult.

“I think there’s an assumption that students will feel normal and more satisfied once they go back to in-person classes, but it’s not something we should assume,” says Conley, of NACS.

On the mental health front, Watson Spiva points out that even students doing well academically may be suffering from severe loneliness. Research after the 1918 pandemic found lingering mental health effects from that health crisis, she adds.

In addition, students who used to be able to get by with part-time or no paid employment could be working

full-time jobs now. Students who may have had health care, or day-care for a dependent, before may not have it now, says Watson Spiva. “Circumstances have changed -- 2019 student data can’t be utilized now. Who are the students we’re serving and what challenges are they bringing to the table? Students are going to come back changed.”

Which calls, of course, for data collection and analysis. “These are going to be the most surveyed students ever,” she quips.

3. Prepare for a support-packed new academic year.

An overwhelming majority of Student Voice survey respondents -- even those who as of this spring were still learning completely from home -- do plan to re-enroll in their

Stepping Out From COVID (cont.)

institutions for the fall term; only 5 percent said they would not be returning. (NACS research, however, found that 30 percent of students seriously considered dropping out during this academic year.)

Many institutions are thinking of sophomores as “the new freshmen” and including them in orientation events or creating separate orientations for this group of students.

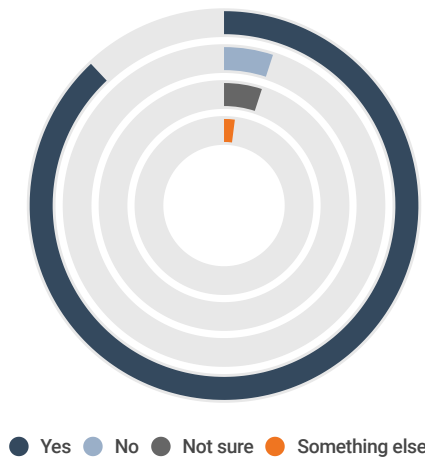
UT Knoxville, where Plowman reports that enrollment is up for the fall, is launching the [Vols Start Back](#) initiative this year to reorient returning sophomores, juniors and seniors to in-person campus life. “In some ways, we’re orientating three first-year classes: those coming from high school, sophomores who spent freshman year in a predominantly virtual environment and juniors who had only one semester fully in person. We’re approaching this as if all of them are first-year students,” says Amber Williams, vice provost for student success.

Upon completion of in-person programming over six weeks, each participating student will receive a \$250 stipend. “Some of it involves academic support services and meeting with a coach. Some of it is leadership development and participating in career development activities, and there’s an inclusion and diversity bucket, too, with a menu of activities,” Williams says. “To get them on the right foot to finish off their college careers, we need them to connect with each other.”

On the academic side, professors

Will Students Return?

Response from freshmen, sophomores and juniors when asked in May if they planned to re-enroll in their colleges for fall 2021



Source: *Inside Higher Ed* / College Pulse survey of 2,000 college students; explore the data [here](#).
Presented by: Kaplan

at Tennessee have made orientation content requests. One was to work with students on how to work as teams for group assignments. “And we’ll be having intentional conversations around engagement in the classroom, what it looks like. When should they approach faculty if having a challenge in a course? When would they approach the academic chair?” Williams explains, adding that understanding hierarchy is necessary. “When students have had frustrations, they were either putting them on social media or emailing higher-ups in organizations.”

The university launched a six-week orientation for freshmen this past year that will continue for 2021-22. The goals for helping students navigate campus are to create an environment where they feel confident and motivated, to set high

expectations but help them be met, and to create structures to ensure students are successful, Williams says.

Math advising and coaching teams, for example, will explain what success looks like, and the study group or tutoring session participation will be incentivized. “They’ll get prizes for showing up to study,” says Williams. No one wants to assume students know what it means to be successful in college, Plowman adds.

Watson Spiva’s hope is that colleges will keep the students at the center of their work. “Students, especially those from underrepresented, low-income, first-generation groups, need college – they don’t just want it,” she says. “We must create an environment to help them meet their goals.” ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/06/23/what-supports-college-students-need-succeed-fall-and-beyond>

Reaching Beyond Campus

Battered by enrollment declines and lost academic momentum among low-income students, colleges across the country are ramping up their off-campus outreach efforts in the wake of the pandemic.

By Sara Weissman // September 29, 2021

Wallace State Community College in Alabama plans to create a community learning center in Arley, a town of approximately 330 people in Winston County, about 45 minutes from the campus.

College administrators spent years reaching out to residents of the county, which Vicki Karolewics, president of the college, described as “extremely rural” with “significant poverty,” but the pandemic intensified that goal as students struggled with remote learning. Even with laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots provided by the college, she said some students were left trying to complete their assignments on their phones because of poor internet access.

Karolewics said the pandemic exacerbated “a long-standing challenge” that demanded “a local solution.”

The focus of the center “will be to place a resident of Winston County who seeks our services ... to place them on a career path ... at the moment they come in the door.”

Wallace State is among the many community colleges across the country ramping up their outreach beyond the campus in the wake of the pandemic. The institutions are offering classes and programs, academic help, and a variety of support services for community members at off-campus locations. Battered by enrollment declines and lost ac-



WALLACE STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Wallace State Community College president Vicki Karolewics partnered with Arley Town Council members to plan a new learning center.

ademic momentum among low-income students weighed down with fresh financial burdens brought on by the pandemic, the colleges are redoubling their efforts to offer community-based opportunities to help current students -- especially adult learners juggling classes alongside work and childcare responsibilities -- to continue their education. The colleges are also using the outreach to encourage other residents to enroll and get new work skills, credentials or degrees.

Karen Stout, president and CEO of Achieving the Dream, a nonprofit organization focused on community college student success, said community college leaders have always focused attention and resources on the needs of their surrounding com-

munities, especially during times of crisis, whether that's natural disasters or economic downturns. Nonetheless, she sees a “renewed” commitment from colleges to building infrastructure for community outreach.

“It's always the same members of our communities that are hurt the most,” she said. “It's those who are marginalized, who have the least resources to respond. So, we reach out and try to support our citizens with services where they are, which end up being community centers, boys' and girls' clubs, public libraries, all types of community-based nonprofit organizations that are located in our communities. I do see an acceleration of those types of outreach activities happening now.”

Reaching Beyond Campus (cont.)

Karolewics hopes Wallace State's community learning center, which will open in January 2022 with eight classrooms and computer labs, will connect students and residents to campus services. Residents can come to the center to study, take workforce training or dual-enrollment classes and complete the online portions of hybrid courses in the computer labs, saving them time-consuming commutes to campus and searches for reliable Wi-Fi. Adult education and enrollment services staff members will be on the premises to answer questions from students and community members. The Arley Town Council will lease a 4.2-acre property to the college for a dollar per year.

Community College of Beaver County, outside Pittsburgh, is also working with local libraries to bring classes off campus. The college will launch two CCBC Community Classrooms in October at two libraries in nearby neighborhoods where many students live. Plans are in the works to add another library in 2022. First-year students can take their freshman orientation and introductory writing courses at the community classrooms, with on-site childcare for students with children provided by the college. Community members can also enroll in noncredit courses in basic computer skills, résumé writing and other subjects.

Anitre Bell, the college's community liaison and assistant director of outreach, said the pandemic inspired the community classroom initiative, because the crisis forced administrators to be even more aware of the barriers students face.



My goal is to have a more educated citizenry and a highly developed talent pipeline who are ready for high-paying jobs that lead to intergenerational change. Because we want to lift people out of poverty and have a more literate society.



"Maybe it's transportation, maybe it's affordability, maybe it's childcare," she said. "I firmly believe that we have to meet people where they are, and based on the pandemic, things have changed, so we have to find ways to supply those resources for others."

Dutchess Community College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., opened an aviation education center this summer at the Hudson Valley Regional Airport for students enrolled in pilot, aviation management and aviation maintenance technician programs. It also [launched a new satellite facility](#) in the town of Fishkill, located on a convenient roadway for commuters and equipped with classrooms, computer labs and student lounges. Students can take a variety of courses at the new location.

"It is my sincere hope that this facility, with its superb classrooms and labs, easily accessible location, and welcoming and open learning spaces, will provide our students -- the next generation of pioneers

-- the space and support they are going to need as they marshal the resources of education, technology and human ingenuity to forge new solutions for the market challenges they will face," Ellen Gambino, provost and vice president of academic affairs and student services and former acting president of the College, [said](#) in a news release.

Stout, of Achieving the Dream, said these community outreach efforts serve as "portals for recruitment" during a time when community college enrollments continue to drop. Community colleges [experienced](#) a decrease of about 10 percent in enrollment between fall 2019 and fall 2020 and a [similar drop in spring 2021](#), according to National Student Clearinghouse Research Center data.

"They are being used for recruitment -- there's no doubt about that," she said.

She noted that community-based academic offerings and support services also help potential stu-

Reaching Beyond Campus (cont.)

dents feel more connected to their local colleges, introducing them to campus resources in places that may feel more comfortable and familiar.

“These community places are really important because so many of our students don’t have a sense of identity as a college student and a college campus is a strange environment, but they may have been visiting a public library since they were children,” she said. “There’s a different type of identity and sense of belonging, and if we’re able to meet prospective students in that environment, we can create a stronger sense of connection to the college.”

Bell also sees community classrooms as a recruitment and retention tool for Community College of Beaver County. Enrollment at the college fell to 1,713 students in fall 2020 from 2,149 students in fall 2019, a loss of 436 students. She said the “flexibility and convenience” of off-campus courses will be a draw for students.

Victor Moreno, community out-

reach manager at Atlantic Cape Community College in New Jersey, said the college’s community initiatives aren’t intended to boost enrollment but have attracted interest in the college from Atlantic City residents. The institution recently received a \$50,000 Neighborhood Revitalization Tax Credit Planning grant from the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, which the college will use to partner with residents to create a neighborhood improvement plan along Atlantic City’s Absecon Inlet, a tourist industry hub where some students and their families live.

The neighborhood improvement idea preceded the pandemic, but the college also offered a host of new services to members of the broader community as a result of the public health emergency, including an information session for DACA students and residents, a two-day event with representatives of the Mexican Consulate in Philadelphia to help local Mexican nationals secure updated passports and consular identification, and hot meals from the college’s academy

of culinary arts for unhoused people in the area.

Moreno believes recruitment and community outreach “kind of walk hand in hand.”

“Sometimes I’m there just to serve the community ... but someone may come up and say, ‘Hey, I’m looking to re-enroll,’ or ‘I didn’t know you were offering free workforce training to Atlantic City residents that are unemployed or underemployed or casino employees,’” he said. “I’m already there to provide that information and meet their needs.”

Karolewics, of Wallace State, said she hopes her college’s community center can have long-lasting effects on not just residents but generations of residents in the surrounding area.

“My goal is to have a more educated citizenry and a highly developed talent pipeline who are ready for high-paying jobs that lead to intergenerational change,” she said. “Because we want to lift people out of poverty and have a more literate society.” ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/09/29/two-year-colleges-ramp-community-outreach-efforts>

The 30% Female Author Experiment

New study finds that increasing gender representation in graduate course syllabi affects male and female students' perceived likelihood of succeeding in the course in surprising ways. The study has implications for academic role models and student success, too.

By [Colleen Flaherty](#) // September 17, 2021

Prior research has shown a gender gap on syllabi in some fields, where in the authors of assigned readings don't represent the gender diversity of the field. Other research has demonstrated the positive impact of role models on student success.

A new study in [PLOS One](#) combines these two areas of research, focusing on graduate-level course syllabi and role models for graduate students. While the discipline at the heart of the study, political science, is changing -- due in part to efforts such as [Women Also Know Stuff](#) -- it has a particular [reputation](#) for [gender bias](#). Even so, the authors of the new study say that their at times surprising findings translate to other fields.

What did the researchers find? When they adjusted the share of female authors on a syllabus from 10 percent to 30 percent, female graduate students' self-efficacy, meaning their perceived likelihood of succeeding in the hypothetical course, was not affected. Male students, meanwhile, showed lower self-efficacy, reporting that they were less likely to succeed in the course when more women appeared on the syllabus.

Students' attitudes toward diversity in academe also correlated with their reactions to the syllabi more



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than their own gender did. That is, the gender-diverse, 30 percent-female-author syllabi reduced self-efficacy among students who said they were not supportive of diversity.

In a second experiment, the authors found that students with more academic role models had a higher sense of self-efficacy. This was not related to students' gender, or to their role models' gender. At the same time, some students -- namely female students and those who said they valued diversity -- seemed to actively seek out female role models.

"Our results ultimately suggest that exposure to female role models relates in surprising ways to Ph.D.

students' self-efficacy," the study says. "Having more female role models correlates with greater expectations of academic success among certain groups of students, but with diminished expectations of academic success among other groups."

Study co-author Amy Erica Smith, Liberal Arts and Sciences Dean's Professor and associate professor of political science at Iowa State University, said that these findings do not mean that syllabi should include fewer women to accommodate those who apparently don't see gender diversity as a benefit.

"When we showed students a syllabus with a low percentage of women

The 30% Female Author Experiment (cont.)

authors, men expressed greater confidence than women in their ability to do well in the class," she said. "When we showed students syllabi with more equal gender representation, men's self-confidence declined, but women and men still expressed equal confidence in their ability to do well. So making the curriculum more fair doesn't actually hurt men relative to women."

Instead, she said, increasing women's representation in readings "just evens things out -- which may feel like a loss to some men." What's "particularly stark" about that result, Smith added, is that the "backlash occurred just from increasing the percentage of women authors from 10 percent to 30 percent, so we weren't even talking about reaching gender parity."

Co-author Heidi Hardt, associate professor of political science at the University of California, Irvine, said professors have many options for diversifying syllabi today. Along with Women Also Know Stuff, resources include [People of Color Also Know Stuff](#) and a [gender-coded database of citations](#) that Hardt and Smith developed.

Faculty members may want to reach out to professional networks and disciplinary organizations to learn more about crafting more representative syllabi, Hardt said. And given the variation in students' attitudes, professors "might also find it useful to have a conversation discussing with students the selection of readings that appear in their syllabi."

Smith, Hardt and their other co-au-



Having more female role models correlates with greater expectations of academic success among certain groups of students, but with diminished expectations of academic success among other groups.



thor, Shauna N. Gillooly, an Irvine graduate student, based their study on a survey of 297 Ph.D. candidates in 50 highly selective programs in the U.S., fielded in late 2019.

Participants in the study read a randomly assigned version of an invented research methods course syllabus. There were four versions of the syllabus, and all were identical except for the assigned readings. On some of the syllabi, only 10 percent of readings were female-authored -- what prior research has shown is the average representation of women in similar graduate-level methods courses in political science. On other syllabi, 30 percent of the authors were women, as other research suggests that group behavior shifts when women reach a "critical mass" of 15 to 30 percent in male-dominated environments.

To get graduate students to think about self-efficacy with respect to their assigned syllabi, the research-

ers asked respondents a single question: "Do you feel as if you would be successful if you took this course?" Other, more general questions asked whether respondents cared about syllabus diversity and gauged students' quantitative and qualitative research orientation.

Regarding role models, the researchers described academic role models as those "whom you admire professionally and whose research you admire. Graduate students often identify role models by reading that person's research, seeing them teach or give a talk, or working for them as a research assistant." Following that definition, the authors asked students if they'd had role models during their undergraduate or graduate training and how many -- up to six or more role models. The survey also asked students to reflect on their top one or two role models and identify those role models' genders.

To determine program self-efficacy

The 30% Female Author Experiment (cont.)

cy, students were also asked about how well they fit into their Ph.D. programs; how likely they were to finish, publish and be cited; and how supported they felt by fellow students, their department and their supervisor.

The authors had expected that increasing women's representation in syllabi would boost their course-related self-efficacy, but that wasn't the case. Instead, again, men felt slightly less efficacious. Students' attitudes toward diversity did relate to how they felt about the syllabi and therefore the course, as expected: exposure to the gender-diverse syllabi lowered the likelihood of reporting high course-related self-efficacy by 30 percent for the

students least supportive of diversity. The effect was less significant and not statistically significant among students who supported diversity.

Also consistent with what the authors expected, women tended to exhibit homophily in choosing role models: some 77 percent of male students who said they had role models had a same-gender role model, compared to 66 percent of women -- even though women represent between just 27 and 32 percent of professors in political science. Also consistent with researchers' expectations, faculty role models were associated with a substantial increase in students' self-efficacy. While 10 percent of students

reported having no role models and 7 percent reported six or more, the median student had between three and five role models, and moving from no role models to the sample median was associated with a gain in efficacy of 0.16 on a zero-to-one scale, or one standard deviation of the dependent variable. In another surprise to researchers, however, role model gender did not influence female students' self-efficacy.

Ultimately, Smith said, "mentoring and role models are extremely important for graduate student success, regardless of student gender or race, and of role model gender or race. It's important for students to find successful professionals with whom they identify, period." ■

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/09/17/30-female-author-experiment-political-science-syllabi>

Rethinking the New Normal

Colleges should redesign schedules to ensure more students are able to get the courses they need to move toward graduation and ultimately employment, argues Tom Shaver.

By [Tom Shaver](#) // May 22, 2020

COVID-19 has caused mass disruptions to higher education. The abrupt move to online this semester, the competing demands of a health and economic crisis, and an uncertain fall all threaten current students' progress.

With incoming students, it's unclear whether the crisis will scare them off or if [enrollment](#) will grow in the fall, as it typically does during a recession when millions of jobless Americans suddenly find themselves searching for new skills. And if new and returning students do show up in large numbers, there are pressing questions about whether they will be drawn to a different mix of programs than just a few months ago.

Taken together, all this creates a raft of challenges for institutional planners. Chief among them is how to ensure students are able to get the courses they need to continue to move toward graduation and ultimately employment. The processes that control course access -- schedule building and registration -- must be rethought in this environment.

Most institutions copy schedules from the previous year to minimize disruption. But that won't work for two reasons. First, our research has shown that, even under the

best circumstances, those schedules are not typically aligned to students' needs. And second, such schedules are rarely efficient for institutions. The financial fallout of COVID-19 will force many colleges and universities to create leaner schedules with fewer course options, especially for requirements in low-enrollment majors.

Given that reality, institutions will need to rethink the dominant model for determining access to courses. The status quo -- giving scheduling priority based on credits, or senior standing -- won't cut it in this environment.

That approach leaves students who have earned fewer credits but may have more constrained schedules with fewer options. It may also prevent them from accessing over-enrolled, or bottlenecked, courses that they need to continue to stay on their degree pathway. Imagine, for example, a single mother who is 12 credits into a degree program and has suddenly found herself homeschooling her children, or a stocker at a local store who has had his hours cut and needs to move more quickly through his degree program and into a new job.

Instead of the usual approach, institutions should focus on providing access to courses based on



SORBETTO/ISTOCK

need, not credits. A targeted pre-registration period is a particularly promising approach and works by offering students with the greatest need the opportunity to register first -- guaranteeing they have access to essential courses at times that fit their schedules.

This can help reduce the impact of bottleneck courses -- those for which student demand outpaces available seats -- which can be a massive barrier to degree completion. [Our research](#) shows that nearly a quarter of all courses are overloaded, signaling they may be bottlenecked. And those percentages may grow as COVID-19's disruption pushes students toward certain courses at the same time

Rethinking the New Normal (cont.)

that budget cuts force colleges to cut sections.

Before COVID-19, a number of institutions were already leveraging student-friendly schedules and pre-registration to reduce the negative impact of bottlenecks, particularly for the large numbers of [working students](#), [parents](#) and those only able to attend [part-time](#).

Take the case of Sacramento State, which is aggressively working to improve course capacity as part of California State University's Graduation Initiative 2025. This past fall, the College of Arts and Letters piloted a new program to pre-enroll 325 incoming freshmen in block schedules based on a survey about their interests, learning styles and availability. The results were astounding: only 5 percent of students opted out of their predetermined schedule, and only 20 percent of students changed the time for a course -- meaning more students were starting on a clear path to graduation.

This strategy ensures that more students are taking the courses they need to satisfy requirements and graduate in four years. It also allows students to know exactly

when their courses will be and design their work schedule well in advance, or have their work schedule inform their pre-enrollment schedule. Most important, it ensures that students get seats in common bottleneck courses in their first year, mitigating cascading delays in those courses -- delays that could expand with students likely to repeat courses this coming year.

Sacramento State's pilot program was so successful that a variation of it will be used for the [entire first-year class](#) of 4,300 students in the 2020-21 academic year. But this kind of scheduling remains far from reality for most institutions.

A core challenge in moving to such solutions is that institutions simply don't have enough information about students to know what courses they need and when they need them. As students register for courses, there is also no gatekeeper that can help identify whether a student must take that specific course to move forward or whether it is one of many options for that student to graduate. Instead, institutions should be gathering and using data to create more student-friendly schedules.

The process must be precise, specific and informed by student pathways. For example, a course that is necessary for some students but simply of interest to others should be offered during the preregistration period only to students who need it. Other interested students can then register for any remaining seats during the regular registration period.

With better data, institutions could redesign their operations to focus more on helping students whose lives have been disrupted or were already complicated prior to this crisis. They can do so, in part, by ensuring that early access to classes is given to students based on need, not arbitrary credit or year thresholds. The problem is, we must be willing to ask and to dig into the data.

For students who work or are raising children or otherwise have complex lives, being shut out of a required course can mean an additional semester or year in college. It can mean more debt. It can mean they never graduate.

Being able to schedule courses at certain times is far from a luxury for these students; it's a necessity -- and now more than ever. ■

Bio

Tom Shaver is founder and CEO of Ad Astra, a company using data mining technology to help colleges and universities improve student access and lower costs.

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/05/22/colleges-should-redesign-course-schedules-focus-more-student-success-opinion>

Curing Programmitis to Create Diverse Student Success

Transformational change -- a total restructuring -- is needed to disrupt embedded patterns and reorient campuses for a new student body, argues Adrianna Kezar.

By [Adrianna Kezar](#) // January 29, 2020

“Programmitis.” This term, coined a few decades ago by Daryl Smith, senior research fellow and professor emerita of education and psychology at Claremont Graduate University, was used to describe campus efforts to address the increasingly diverse student body. College and universities looked at students as a problem needing to be fixed with interventions -- with programs. Smith was concerned with not only the deficit orientation but also the sheer inadequacy of such approaches. The programs typically reached few students, touched them too lightly and applied a Band-Aid to a gaping wound. Smith called instead for institutional transformation to support diverse student success.

Higher education has been making efforts to address a more diverse student body for four decades, yet the needle has moved very slowly, with only minimal progress in improving the retention and success of first-generation, low-income and racialized minority students. The same goes for adult, commuter and part-time students, while statistics for other groups -- such as transgender, learning-disabled and LGBTQ students -- are not even tracked. Higher education has added programs and services “on the side” without a substantial rethinking of its core functions and practices.

In [Becoming a Student-Ready College](#), Tia Brown McNair and her col-

leagues called for campus leaders to rethink their efforts at wishing for different students while putting in just marginal supports. The authors noted the need, as well, for significant changes and indicted the organizational structures in higher education as being impenetrable for students.

The calls for institutional transformation and culture change have either been too daunting, leading campuses to continue piloting small changes, or have left higher education administrators not knowing how to approach such a process. What many of those administrators have yet to grasp is that the problem is not students. Rather, the issues stem from the reality that colleges and universities have never been set up to serve first-generation, low-income or underserved racially minoritized students.

In [Recognizing and Serving Low-Income Students in Higher Education](#) I traced how colleges, minority-serving ones aside, developed historically to serve the wealthy and elite, demonstrating how ingrained the patterns of whiteness, class and privilege are. In those analyses, I highlighted how the structures of higher education institutions prevent students from succeeding, and I underscored why side programs and services alone will never suffice. A total restructuring is needed to disrupt these embedded patterns



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and to reorient campuses for a new student body.

In a new report, [“Creating a Diverse Student Success Infrastructure,”](#) from the Pullias Center for Higher Education and the American Council on Education, I provide a pathway for leaders to conduct this institutionally transformative work, modeled on the examples of campuses that have been successful in undergoing such changes. I base my ideas not only on empirical data but also on sound research from systems theory -- research that demonstrates that when the infrastructure is aligned to support a change initiative, transformation is more likely to occur and be sustained.

The infrastructure of a higher education institution includes core fea-

Curing Programmitis to Create Diverse Student Success (cont.)

tures that facilitate organizational functioning and day-to-day operations, including planning, governance and decision making, policy, finance/resource allocation, information and institutional research, facilities and information technology, human resources and development, incentives and reward structures, and metrics and accountability. The more these elements are strategically leveraged and aligned with the goals of diverse student success, the more an institution can mobilize to effectively serve such students.

For example, policies dictate the actions of faculty and staff members and create the conditions in which student success can be achieved or not. Because policies establish the possibilities for action, they are a strong driver of systems and cultural change. Academic policies such as grading on a curve encourage competition and signal to students they are in a survival environment, not a thriving one. Another example might be scheduling policies that do not allow for students in the same cohort to take classes together and form a community that encourages their success.

This is particularly important because campus policies were generally established when institutions were not diverse. If senior adminis-

trators routinely examine key institutional policies, they can work to change the ones that create barriers -- such as those related to admissions criteria, student advising, curriculum, staff hiring criteria and faculty promotion and tenure. Left unexamined, however, such policies can shape a set of experiences that is exclusive rather than inclusive.

An effective institutional infrastructure includes three core elements related to change and systemic support for diverse student success:

- **Implementation of interventions to support students.** Efforts to put in place proactive advising, for instance, without investments in the infrastructure -- such as technology, training and policy review -- are likely to face serious challenges. In contrast, when the proper infrastructure is in place, it facilitates, eases and often speeds the adoption of new programs and initiatives.
- **Institutionalization of sustained interventions over the long run.** Interventions often come and go due to a lack of tangible support or because organizational hurdles are too overwhelming. Yet if campus administrators pledge continuing financial, policy and leadership support for cross-campus mentoring, for ex-

ample, then change agents will struggle less to overcome organizational inertia and any issues that prevent them from supporting and embedding the change.

- **Culture change resulting from having student success values integrated into the day-to-day work of the campus.** That includes the campus's decisions, processes and activities. For example, moving from grading on a curve to a more developmental grading approach reinforces and embeds an institutional ethos that supports student success rather than a sink-or-swim approach.

Ultimately, the benefit of the student success infrastructure is that it can lead to broader institutional transformation. As more and more elements of the infrastructure are aligned toward the same underlying values of diverse student success, the more likely it is that the entire campus will be a different place.

It is time to move support for diverse students from the margins of institutions -- in isolated programs and services -- to the center. With the right infrastructure, we can finally make good on the values that promote the success of all students in college. ■

Bio

Adrianna Kezar is a professor of higher education at the University of Southern California and director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education. She is a national expert on student success, equity and diversity; the changing faculty; change; governance and leadership in higher education.

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/01/29/transformational-change-needed-campus-adequately-serve-diverse-new-student-body>

Social Credits and Student Success

Craig Ross suggests a program to align good student behavior with lower costs and enhanced retention and persistence in higher education.

By **Craig Ross** // June 24, 2021

Student success and progress to graduation remains a somewhat intransigent challenge. Colleges and universities have spent the past several decades developing interventions at every stage of the student academic life cycle, from first- and second-year coordinators to teams of professionals housed in Centers of Success and programming initiatives in residence halls to engage students in living-learning communities. Yet nationally, the six-year college graduation rate has been stuck at around [60 percent](#) for years, and Black, Latino and low-income students' graduation rates have [remained even lower](#).

I believe as a higher education professional, I possess an unusual perspective on the underlying problem with enhancing student success. Even though I possess a Ph.D., my educational attainment history is, to say the least, terrible. When I graduated high school, in 1994, I ranked 97 out of 104. I began my postsecondary education at a local community college because my sole purpose for college attendance was to play soccer. I struggled to obtain an associate's degree six years later.

The question remains, how did I achieve a bachelor's, master's and Ph.D.? The answer is quite simple: I wanted it. Yes, I had support, but I had support when I was floundering. As a young adult, my parents



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signaled the importance of earning a college education through emotional and financial support, but I still struggled.

The bulk of the research literature on enhancing student success has focused on identifying the support mechanisms and environments that help or hinder students. The numerous barriers to college are well-known, and as higher education professionals and policy makers, we have to continue to try to remove those barriers. But our students also have to want it, and only about 60 percent really do. The other 40 percent mainly cost themselves, and all of us, a lot of money.

Do not get me wrong: as you'll see later in this essay, I'm not talking

about low-income students who drop out for lack of funds or because they need to support their families or the like. I don't believe the other 40 percent should be forgotten, either, but the best solution for them is not within the scope of this article.

Rather, my focus in this piece is on the other 60 percent, whom we have to educate as efficiently as possible in order to not continue to escalate costs for those students who truly want a college degree. Being efficient is magnified even more if we consider how the Pareto principle applies to higher education. Simply put, the Pareto principle, an economic law, states that 80 percent of effect is the result of 20 percent of the cause. In other

Social Credits and Student Success (cont.)

words, 80 percent of our resources are dedicated to 20 percent of the student body.

Most higher education professionals -- myself included, having spent more than seven years working in a residential life office -- can attest that we spend a significant amount of time and resources dealing with bad student behaviors. Those behaviors are not predisposed by socioeconomic status, race or gender. Rather, they are born from the popular opinion that the college experience is not the college experience without shenanigans. I have not had a conversation with anyone my age who did not have a story of partying in college. They surely did not talk about perfect attendance or their amazing English literature professor or how they graduated in 3.5 years. Except my wife, of course.

The popular media, such as the movies *Old School* and *Animal House*, glorifies college shenanigans, and generations have been exposed to the behaviors expected of them when they attend college. Over time, higher education has increased its focus on mitigating the bad behaviors through an expansion of the student affairs profession and an explosion of corresponding expenses.

I have struggled with how to change this narrative and to align good student behaviors that lead to student success and help to control costs. However, it was not until 2019 that Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang put forth a novel idea that I felt might help resolve the behavior problem that plagues higher education. Yang proposed a social



The question remains, how did I achieve a bachelor's, master's and Ph.D.? The answer is quite simple: I wanted it. Yes, I had support, but I had support when I was floundering. As a young adult, my parents signaled the importance of earning a college education through emotional and financial support, but I still struggled.



credit system, in which citizens can earn, trade or redeem social credits for good behaviors like volunteering or helping their neighbors. In a similar college system, students could earn social credits for good behaviors if they, for example:

- Attended each course a certain number of times during the semester;
- Completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) by Dec. 1;
- Attended a diversity conference;
- Participated in a leadership development program or club event;
- Attended an event in their residence hall or a student success workshop;
- Attended a financial literacy workshop or job fair;
- Volunteered for an event through community development; or
- Attended an office hour with their professor.

A college or university that implemented such a social credit program would have plenty of opportunities to modify it. For example, it could initially set the number of social credits earned for perfect course attendance at 50, but then raise that number at a later date. The program could also offer on-the-spot incentives for participation in certain events. Administrators could send students a notification on their phones that if they went to such an event, the number of credits would double. The students who receive such messages could be randomly selected so that researchers could develop effective strategies for increasing participation.

The faculty could also eventually take part in the program and earn social credits, redeemable for cash, for teaching at nontraditional times. For example, they could offer to teach their course on a Saturday morning at 8 a.m., potentially helping to alleviate challenges with space utilization. Your imagination might yield numerous more possibilities to explore.

Social Credits and Student Success (cont.)

Even though the goal of this type of program would be to incentivize good behaviors, your institution could also implement punitive measures for certain bad behaviors. For example, would it be unreasonable to deduct social credits from an underaged student for drinking alcohol? What if the student was transported to the hospital for alcohol poisoning? Colleges and universities have created alcohol workshops for offenders that usually include a minimal charge -- why not deduct social credits instead? (I could argue that deducting credits is a fairer approach, as a charge of actual money is more punitive for low-socioeconomic-status students.)

Ideally, the students who engage in

positive behaviors would be rewarded financially to help lower their total cost of attendance. These students could redeem their social credits for cash or for a tuition discount. Over time, as bad behaviors lessen, personnel and programming expenditures could be reallocated or reduced, further lowering the cost of attendance.

Of course, implementing a social credit system would have its own challenges, the biggest of which would be working through the bureaucracy of higher education and the investment -- in terms not only of dollars but also people's careers -- in expanding student affairs programs. Yet while many administrators hold fast to the fallacy of "if

we only had more money, we could create more programs to help students persist," most of the what's been spent on those programs has not helped improve graduation rates for years.

The intention of this article is not to be dismissive of the profession of student affairs and the work of the individuals dedicated to their profession and the students they serve. In fact, these same professionals will play a key role in helping in the development and implementation of a social credit system. It is simply a plea, after years of being stuck in the same place, to try something different and add a social credit system to the marketplace of ideas. ■

Bio

Craig Ross is cross-divisional budget and facility officer at the State University of New York at Brockport. He has 20 years of experience in areas such as student affairs, information technology, facilities services and financial management.

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/06/24/colleges-should-use-social-credits-align-good-student-behavior-retention-and>

The Value of Effective Nudging

Despite increasing debate about its viability, if done correctly and with an appropriate level of intention, it can significantly improve student outcomes, John M. Burdick and Emily Peeler contend.

By **John M. Burdick** and **Emily Peeler** // February 23, 2021

Until recently, the concept of nudging -- low-cost, low-touch interventions aimed at driving people toward particular behaviors without mandating action or restricting options -- was a popular strategy with student support units across higher education. Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein popularized this approach, based on behavioral science, in their 2008 book, *Nudge*, and scholars like [Ben Castleman](#) at the University of Virginia and [Caroline Hoxby](#) at Stanford University shortly thereafter adapted it for use in higher education. Recognizing that social, physical and psychological factors can often discourage students from acting in their own self-interest, those scholars showed that nudging could help students navigate college and the complex bureaucratic processes that often create barriers to academic success.

In the years that followed, [admissions](#), [financial aid](#) and [registrar](#) departments across the country began using nudging -- through digital platforms like emails, learning management systems and especially text messaging -- as a means to help students act on things like paying a bill, submitting a FAFSA or meeting a deadline. Even Michelle Obama got on board with the [Reach Higher Initiative](#), which used text message and email-based nudges to [increase awareness of the val-](#)



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[ue of a postsecondary education and provided students with access to financial aid resources](#). People hoped that this simple, affordable and easily scalable use of technology would help colleges address some of the consistent challenges related to student access and achievement. Following the 2008 recession, resource-strapped institutions viewed nudging as a simple and cost-effective way to offer structured and intrusive support to students, especially for those most vulnerable.

But as more student support teams applied this strategy, and more research was conducted, nudging's potential to influence change in students' behaviors came increasingly into question. In 2019, for in-

stance, Philip Oreopoulos and Uros Petronijevic published a [research study](#) that argued that none of the relatively large nudging initiatives that they examined seemed to have significant influence on academic outcomes, especially when it came to driving students toward anything more than straightforward, task-oriented actions. Another [study](#) even showed that when [scaled nationally](#), repeated text messages and emails did not prompt more students to apply to college or complete the FAFSA.

Nudging, once labeled the [\\$6 solution](#), seems to have been increasingly discounted as the magic bullet that can solve the big issues in higher education. Many administrators who have turned to this tool

The Value of Effective Nudging (cont.)

to help drive access and enrollment goals have been left wondering if nudging is nothing more than a new way to send students reminder messages.

Nudging and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Then came the pandemic.

During the last several months, our students have not only been undergoing the COVID-19 pandemic but also a devastated economy, police violence and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protesting, and the political turmoil of the election and its aftermath. They're experiencing a level of stress that is unprecedented for students in modern American history. Surely this stress is impacting how students are navigating the rigors of college life and learning in ways we're not even fully aware of yet. It's up to faculty and administrators to find creative ways to support and engage with our students during this trying context.

While [the debate on the viability of nudging has continued](#), we in the New York University Office of Student Success believe that text message-based nudging, if done correctly and with an appropriate level of intention, can improve student outcomes. It can also increase levels of curricular and co-curricular engagement and, perhaps most important, increase student perception of support and connectedness during this challenging time. Thus, for the start of the past fall semester, we designed and implemented a large text message-based nudge campaign that had two primary intentions.

The first and more prevailing was



Nudges should also be quite short -- fewer than 300 characters -- so be as direct and concise as possible without coming off as curt. Use a voice that feels authentic to the sender and that encourages students to view positive behavior, such as adding assignment due dates to a digital calendar, as a social norm and salient behavior.



to send students passive content. The goal was not to drive immediate action, like many of the early nudging campaigns, which focused on task-driven behavior like submitting a FAFSA or registering for courses. Rather, we wanted to positively influence academic behavior over a prolonged period of time by sending students a series of quick tips that encourage behaviors that lead to academic and personal growth. Those tips, which include learning-to-learn content such as goal setting, time management and learning strategies, along with wellness and mindfulness suggestions, weren't designed to elicit an immediate response from students. Rather, their purpose was to subconsciously redirect students' attention at key moments during the academic semester. For example: here is an example of a goal-setting reminder that we sent to students in the first week of the semester: "Hi <Student Name>! New semester, new you, new goals! Remember, make your goals SMART. S - Specific. M - Measurable. A - Actionable. R - Realis-

tic. T - Timely. What is one goal you have for the spring semester?"

The second intent was to give students an open channel of communication that allowed for individualized support opportunities. Students can choose to answer but often are not prompted to do so, and a professional case manager will respond, offering support in real time. That has allowed us to be mindful of the time commitment required of our team, while still providing the support students need.

In partnership with faculty members, we've focused our outreach efforts on first-year students and those in a large introductory biology course. We chose this population in part because of the distinct challenges they face as they begin their college experience. We saw the benefits of this particular campaign as multifold, including the ease of scalability, the relatively low cost (we worked with a third-party vendor for the technology component) and the ability to target at-risk

The Value of Effective Nudging (cont.)

student groups through real-time communication and interaction.

What We Found

We are optimistic that this approach is moving us in the right direction. This is a new initiative at a challenging moment, so we continue to experiment, survey students and adapt to continually improve the process. But while further assessment is needed, early results have shown a positive relationship between receiving academic nudges and student academic performance in high-enrollment, high-stumble-rate STEM courses. The opt-out rate for the biology course was a mere 0.5 percent.

Moreover, a fall survey of nudge recipients showed that 94 percent of students said the texts made them feel like someone at NYU cared about their success, 95 percent said they felt comfortable reaching out for help, 96 percent said the texts made them feel more informed about university resources and 95 percent found text messaging to be an effective form of communication during remote learning. And in a large universitywide survey, first-year students also reported feeling more connected to the university community at large -- a result that our nudge campaign surely influenced. Student responses to our messages have been highly positive, with many students expressing gratitude for the content and to be hearing from a real person. Common responses are expressions of thanks, appreciation and "I needed this."

A particularly poignant example was a message of affirmation we sent to students on the same day

many of them learned they'd need to quarantine in their dorms. Students were feeling unprepared, anxious and scared. In interacting with our text message, many realized for the first time that a real person was on the other side -- someone who cared about their success and was available to chat, joke and let them vent their frustrations.

Above all else, what we are seeing is a change in students' perceptions. By sending encouraging messages that reinforce positive academic habits and affirm belonging, we are finding that students perceive greater support from the university. As student support practitioners, is that not what we are here for?

How to Implement an Effective Nudge Campaign

This moment is calling on us to change our behaviors, become more agile and find creative solutions to best support our students to adapt holistically -- rather than continually asking them to change, despite the precarity they are facing. Here are some tips for designing and implementing a nudge campaign to engage and support your students during COVID-19 at your own university.

Reframe what you define as nudges and how to use them. Researchers at [Duke University's Teaching and Learning Innovation Lab](#) have argued that the concept of nudging has become a sort of a catch-all term to "refer to virtually any intervention designed to create incremental behavior change." Under this framing, email or text message reminders are often conceptualized as nudges, when in reality they are nothing more than traditional

reminders. Nudges should be more ubiquitous and passive in nature -- they are nudges, not [shoves](#) or [nags](#) -- and they should not always require immediate action or response. This is why with text-based nudges, response rate is not a valid measure of the nudges' effectiveness.

We recommend that you design your nudges based on behavioral psychology theory to gently encourage subtle changes in student behavior. The U.K. Cabinet Office's Institute of Government in conducting in their [MINDSPACE Approach](#) provides a great framework.

Send nudges from a human, not a bot. Allow for two-way communication between your team and students. One of the key things that we learned as we developed our program was that students are far more likely to engage with nudges if they clearly come from a person. Students, like the rest of us, are receiving automated emails, texts and other forms of digital communication all the time. It is easy to ignore this communication when you believe it is autogenerated. While you will be sending these nudges to large groups of people at once, use a staff member's name in the message and send a photo or other indication that a human being is directly communicating with students.

Also, [research in behavioral science](#) has shown that by the feelings we have toward a messenger and their perceived authority influences the weight we give to the information they share with us. If you build a positive rapport with students through consistent,

The Value of Effective Nudging (cont.)

friendly and useful messaging, they will be more likely to pay attention to nudges. We have also found that while sending a message from an authority figure like a university employee gives it a certain gravitas, students also value hearing from peers. Thus, peer-to-peer messaging may also be a useful strategy for a nudge campaign.

Be intentional and specific. Many of the earlier nudge campaigns worked because they were fairly intentional about whom they were nudging and when, as well as what behaviors they hoped to change. Thus, it's best to fragment the population you want to reach into subsets according to school, academic program and enrollment year so that the content is as relevant as possible. At NYU, we chose to nudge first-year students because we felt we could have the greatest impact on this group of students; their awareness of university resources was fairly limited and their academic behaviors were less engrained compared to upper-class students.

Regarding content and scheduling, your academic calendar should guide all messages. But leave room for the unexpected by building in

some flexibility to adjust to changes.

Pay attention to language and tone.

The language should be persuasive and confident, not aggressive or pushy. Nudges should also be quite short -- fewer than 300 characters -- so be as direct and concise as possible without coming off as curt. Use a voice that feels authentic to the sender and that encourages students to view positive behavior, such as adding assignment due dates to a digital calendar, as a social norm and salient behavior. Also, use language that frames behavior as part of a larger public commitment, like nudging around COVID-19 social distance practices, and makes students feel better about themselves for taking action.

Collaborate with campus partners.

When nudging students, remember that they are interacting with a host of other campus partners. Buy-in from faculty is a useful way to connect your academic skill-building nudges with the learning that is happening in the classroom. Doing that will make nudges feel like a synergistic part of the students' educational experience rather than one-off, out-of-context reminders.

Also, when you use nudges as a way to drive students toward un-

derutilized but important campus resources, always make sure you are not operating in isolation. You do not want to send a nudge to a large group of students reminding them of tutoring and academic support without first connecting with the team that provides that service.

In conclusion, for those who work directly with students, COVID-19 has undoubtedly caused great disruption to the normal practice of student learning, engagement and support. It has forced all of us to quickly pivot and rethink our normal approaches. [Rebecca Solnit](#) reminds us that humans have a distinct ability to do great altruistic, communitarian, resourceful and imaginative things in the face of a disaster. Now more than ever, we must look for creative ways to best support students as they face immeasurable levels of uncertainty, stress and fatigue.

Is text message-based nudging a magic bullet that can solve all of the issues facing higher education during this challenging period? No. But it can be an effective, scalable and efficient way to engage, support and encourage college students in this unprecedented time. ■

Bio

John M. Burdick is an associate director, and Emily Peeler is the program administrator, in the Office of Student Success at New York University.

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/02/23/how-strong-nudge-campaign-can-improve-student-outcomes-during-covid-opinion>

Moving Beyond Binary Thinking

Mike Krause offers two key ways colleges can build a more flexible path toward student success after the pandemic.

By **Mike Krause** // February 15, 2021

Like every other higher education leader, I spent most of the last 10 months reacting to the operational imperatives driven by the COVID-19 crisis. Each day presented a novel crisis, and just when we thought we'd see no more plot twists, a new one emerged. In the midst of that maelstrom and as the state's higher education chief, I often found myself trying to find elusive time to process what these daily crises meant for our enterprise over the long term.

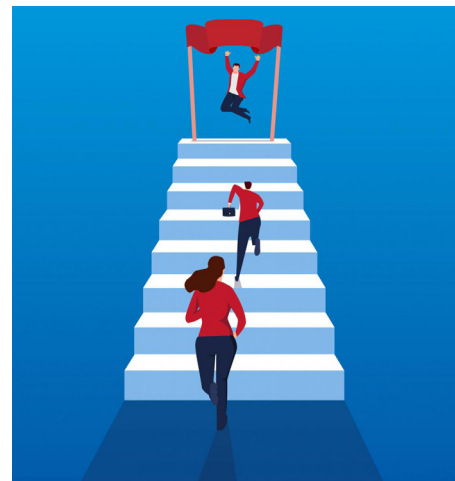
Having now moved to the private sector and out of the role of a public official, I have had time to reflect. I now believe one of the primary challenges for higher education that COVID has highlighted is whether we can transition away from a binary way of thinking regarding the choices we provide to students. For decades, colleges and universities have offered students a series of 0 percent or 100 percent propositions: either you complete the semester the way you started it, or you don't stay enrolled; either you finish college and obtain a degree, or you don't finish at all. We can do better.

In the midst of the pandemic chaos, college and university campuses have experienced a vital truth: when we need to radically alter course for the sake of student success, incredible tasks can be ac-

complished. We've implemented innovations that would have been laughed out of staff meetings a few years ago because we had no other choice. Operational shifts that would have inevitably been met with the chorus of "The data system won't let us do that" have actually been successful, proving once and for all that data systems are not sentient beings -- they just do those things we program them to do.

Has it been ideal? No. But we've learned some important lessons, and those lessons should now propel us forward, moving in a new direction that leaves behind some of our previous inflexible operating principles.

First, let's examine the toggle to online learning that occurred last March. While it was by no means easy, institutions quickly transitioned online because the imperatives of COVID-19 left no other option. During the fall semester, additional -- albeit slightly less chaotic -- transitions took place when dictated by public health conditions. Those shifts, while difficult, exhibited a degree of agility that stands in stark contrast to the traditional higher education structure in which students begin the semester and are locked into that attendance mode with no leeway for interference from life circumstances,



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whether mundane or tragic.

Going back in time to fall 2019, what would we have told the adult learner who experienced a work schedule change? What about the student whose parent became ill so they needed to take on a caregiver role, which made attendance impossible? We all know the unfortunate answer. Before the pandemic, the option likely given to the student was no option at all: drop out and re-enroll next semester. The most positive scenario would have been to offer them an incomplete, thwarting their educational pursuits for six to eight months.

This sort of high-stakes structure doesn't have to be our future. In fact, much of the work faculty members have poured into online learning the past 12 months can become a catalyzing spark rather than a ves-

Moving Beyond Binary Thinking (cont.)

tige of the pandemic we leave in the past. Colleges and universities can build on this foundation to ensure that courses, especially those in the fragile first semesters of a student's journey toward a degree, continue to have the toggle option to go online.

This flexibility would serve as the much-needed lifeline we can throw to a student to prevent them from leaving campus when "life happens." At a minimum, we have created asynchronous instructional materials that all students can benefit from, using complementary online materials as a supportive layer when needed. Ask any engineering student about their journey through differential equations, and they would agree that being able to access on-demand lectures would make a notoriously grueling course far more manageable.

Second, we should examine the narrow pathway to a credential that we currently offer students. COVID-19 has highlighted the fragility of our students, so many of whom are one unfortunate incident or ill-timed occurrence away from leaving college. Despite that fact, we have built a higher education system that creates two divergent and starkly different futures: you must either become a graduate or a drop out. The absence of any middle ground creates an absurdly high-stakes situation that leaves 38 percent of university students and 67 percent of community college students stranded in the "some college, no degree" category.

If we believe every course in the college journey, from liberal arts to



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major area classes, is significant, then we should also recognize that the accrual of courses on the way to a degree leads to important advances in a student's capabilities. Is the student who has successfully completed a 15-hour sequence of general education not more culturally fluent and adept at writing than they were with zero credit hours? They must be, or else something is fundamentally wrong with the value of the education being delivered. Can't we somehow capture the student at the 30-credit-hour mark and award an interim credential of value, ensuring that if they leave before graduating they have a tangible artifact that can elevate their employment prospects?

Of course, this won't be possible in every field -- some disciplines have obvious intervals for awarding credentials, while others are more restricted in their flexibility. But we owe it to students -- and, frankly, the future of the higher education enterprise -- to create a road with multiple on- and off-ramps, espe-

cially at our community colleges.

We should quickly examine technical fields that lead to associate degrees in applied science to determine what subcredentials we can automatically offer before the 60-hour mark, giving students multiple junctures where they can enhance their earning capability. In the university sector, we should actively pursue reverse-transfer programs like those in Maryland and Tennessee that award an associate degree when the credit threshold is crossed for all eligible bachelor's students.

Some people will say that offering this sort of opportunity to students will lead them to seek the earliest possible credential and then leave the institution. That is a fair concern, but I predict that, for many of these students, obtaining an interim credential will have the opposite effect: they will see the certificate on their wall and feel a sense of accomplishment and possibility, creating a of momentum that carries

Moving Beyond Binary Thinking (cont.)

them forward to a final graduation.

After an intense and visceral year, it appears a miracle of determination and science has resulted in normalcy being at least in sight for both higher education institutions and our society more broadly. When that normalcy happens, we will excitedly welcome students to the communal activities that define college and cheer for our athletic teams in crowded stadiums. We will appreciate a world where proximity isn't a safety issue and meetings aren't always on Zoom.

But my hope is that, amid that new normalcy, we will maintain some of the disruptions we've had to embrace and use this opportunity to rebuild structures that align with the contours of what students face in their everyday life. If we do that in the post-pandemic world, we may find the lessons learned during this terrible year have led American higher education towards something new, something more equitable and, ultimately, something better. ■



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Bio

Mike Krause is a senior adviser of government affairs at Bradley Arant Boult Cummings, LLP. He served for four years as the executive director of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission and was the founding director of the Tennessee Promise.

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<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/02/15/two-ways-colleges-can-build-better-paths-toward-student-success-opinion>

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Suite 400
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