Lorain County Community College

Building a culture of student success rooted in an institution's own data and needs

By Jeffrey Selingo

For much of its history, Lorain County in northern Ohio was defined by manufacturing. Steel mills and automobile plants sustained the local economy, attracting generations of high-school graduates who chose stable jobs with good pay and benefits over a college degree. But in the last decade, as manufacturing began to decline, not only did laid-off workers in many industries start enrolling at the local community college for retraining, so did a new generation of high-school graduates who wanted to swap the assembly line for the classroom.

Lorain County Community College (LCCC) was designed for access, however, not necessarily completion. The college was unprepared for students who wanted to earn a degree but then often didn't make it to graduation. In 2011, LCCC retained fewer than six in ten students. Its three-year graduation rate was 8 percent. For African American students, it was only 1 percent.

At first, the college defended itself against criticism of its graduation rates, saying federal graduation statistics measured only full-time, first-time students—less than 10 percent of its enrollment. But even under that definition, the college struggled to get students a degree. At the same time, the two-year college was confronting an uncomfortable reality in its home county: a growing economic and educational gap. Nearby affluent suburbs were filled with college graduates while high-school graduates clustered in low-income urban centers.

The shifts in the local job market and demographics exposed an institution ill adapted to meeting the needs of the modern student and the economy. "We had to change in order to move adults up the socio-economic ladder to have a more meaningful life and contribute to the region's economy," said Marcia Ballinger, the president of Lorain County Community College, who started working at the college in 1991. She was named president in 2016

LCCC isn't alone among colleges and universities in feeling the pressure for higher graduation rates, better retention, and more engaged students. Nowhere is that more true than at community colleges nationwide. Only 20 percent of full-time students seeking degrees at two-year colleges earn degrees within three years.

Key Takeaways

- Alliances of institutions must offer more than just the opportunity to work side by side; they need to offer intense coaching and technical assistance to provide colleges with a critical outside perspective that helps identify an institution's blind spots.

- Institutional networks with common goals, rather than a fuzzy notion of cooperation, can better help colleges learn from each other.

- Before diving into student success initiatives, institutions should clean up and organize data systems so that everyone on campus starts with a common set of facts. The result is that incremental improvement on various metrics are well understood—both to celebrate progress and note needed course corrections.

- Presidents must take an active role in establishing support for reforms, making it clear that student success is a high priority and constantly and consistently communicating it at all levels of the institution.

- Given the relatively short tenures of college presidents, institutions should move quickly to reorient campus services toward students, knowing reforms will take years to show progress. Leaders should design their reform agenda by making bets on the long term but also telling the short-term story that creates the ongoing support they need along with some quick wins.

- With daily demands constantly pushing against longer term priorities of improving retention and graduation rates, campus-wide teams can work across administrative and academic silos that exist on campuses. These teams should have well-defined tasks, with specific plans to end their work when completed to avoid scope creep.

While Lorain's administrators had many ideas about *what* needed to be done to improve student success, they got stuck where leaders usually do when trying to transform their institutions: *how* to do it. The simplest solution was to copy the playbook of other institutions or take ideas gathered at higher-education conferences. But such strategies usually lead to disappointing outcomes. For one, college officials lack a larger appreciation for the diversity and complexity of the underlying challenges they face. Second, they find it difficult to easily translate the success of other institutions to a campus with different administrative and faculty structures.

Instead, Lorain County Community College, with an enrollment of 11,000 students, drew up an original blueprint to solve its particular set of issues. While the plan was informed by what worked on other campuses, LCCC's strategy was rooted in data on its own students and assisted by a network of other higher-education institutions. The result? The college's three-year graduation rate is now 23 percent. Lorain's impressive gains, which have garnered national attention, suggest four key approaches that institutions could follow to jumpstart their own student success efforts.

Develop a network of institutions to share strategies and tactics.

Collaboration is nothing new in higher education, with the most obvious examples being state college systems, athletics conferences, and the alphabet soup of associations that bring together institutions based on geography or mission. But new and potentially more dynamic partnerships have emerged over the las decade that center on solving the crosscutting problems that often get in the way of student success.

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Two of the most prominent of these networks are Completion by Design and Achieving the Dream. In 2011, Lorain County Community College joined both groups, which focus on improving student outcomes using data to inform holistic curricular and institutional changes. Where these networks differ from past attempts at building alliances in higher education is the intense coaching and technical assistance that comes from being part of the coalition.

Case in point at Lorain was the origin of its new approach to developmental education. Like many colleges, LCCC required students to complete developmental classes in math and reading before they could enroll in college-level courses. One of the primary reasons students failed to make it to graduation was because they "got buried in developmental courses," said Jonathan Dryden, the college's provost. Only half of students completed the courses, and even among those who did, too many neglected then to sign up for the college-level classes.

Through its partnership with Completion by Design, LCCC officials found that the Community College of Baltimore County had developed what it called an Accelerated Learning Program to move students more quickly through developmental education. Leaders from the two-year college in Maryland traveled to Ohio to help Lorain put a similar program in place. The approach required students in upper-level developmental writing courses to simultaneously enroll in a college-level class, where a specific number of seats were reserved for them. That ensured basic writers were mixed in with college-ready writers. "Students often learn best," Dryden said, "when learning from each other."

The results from the pilot phase were stunning: 73 percent of students completed the co-requisite writing course alongside the credit-bearing class. The co-requisite approach was expanded across the college with equally positive outcomes. In 2011, before the co-requisite courses were put in place, 36 percent of students completed college-level English; today, 73 percent do. Lorain eventually adopted the accelerated method for

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developmental courses in math as well.

Looking back, Dryden credits Completion by Design and Achieving the Dream for providing not only the framework, but more important, the coaching to understand what was really required behind the scenes. That's the difference, Dryden said, between hearing about an innovation at a conference, for instance, and working together to solve problems as part of larger institutional alliances. The networks, he said, "connect groups of people and institutions to collaborate, form relationships, and develop new partnerships.

One of the reasons alliances fail is that college leaders often see collaboration as a zero-sum game—the wins of the consortium, whether it is grant money from a funder or a joint research project, are losses for individual institutions within the group. This is especially true among smaller institutions that are locked in competitive battles to maintain their enrollment and funding.

But the new versions of institutional networks are all working toward common goals—student success being a big one—rather than a fuzzy notion of cooperation. The coaches who are often an integral part of these modern networks provide a critical outside perspective that helps identify an institution's blind spots.

"Colleges tend to be defensive," Ballinger said, "and the coaches provide the candor and expertise we need."

LCCC's coach from Achieving the Dream, for instance, challenged college officials to track student success measures across every facet of the college's operations. "The idea was that if we're trying to do all these things in one area yet these other things aren't happening, we'd miss the bigger picture," Ballinger said.

Examine institutional data to determine when to scale successful strategies.

Many innovative ideas on campuses never make it past the pilot phase or they remain boutique programs impacting only small numbers of students. Academics prefer to stay with known approaches rather than move institutions forward without guarantees of success.

Indeed, when LCCC leaders wanted to expand the pilot of the accelerated learning program, faculty members and deans initially resisted. The English department had already planned its classes under the old sequential method and didn't want to remake the schedule; the math faculty remained unconvinced that the approach from English would succeed in a different academic discipline.

What changed the minds of skeptical academics was the data. Too often in higher education, decisions are based on the gut instincts of administrators. As Lorain started on the long road to improving student success, one thing the college did was clean up the institution's data so that everyone on campus was starting with a common set of facts. That also meant any incremental improvement on various metrics would be well understood—both to celebrate progress and note needed course corrections. Taking a step back in the beginning to ensure the robustness of the college's own data, Dryden added, "helped us focus the campus on the big issues."

One of the big issues the data exposed was the lagging retention and completion rates of low-income students at Lorain. Because LCCC had developed its capacity to analyze and apply data and had success working within networks, it was one of three two-year colleges in Ohio chosen to partner with the City University of New York (CUNY) on a project to replicate its highly successful Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, widely known as ASAP. That program—which provides full-time students with intensive advising, career support, and help with finances, including MetroCards for use on public transportation—has nearly doubled the graduation rate of the 25,000 CUNY students who participate.

The question was whether the CUNY program could be adapted elsewhere. Colleges are often reluctant to copy ideas from other institutions for two reasons. One, they want to be known for developing their own solutions. Second, college officials think their institutions are unique and don't believe someone else's idea will work on their campus.

But Matthew Mercado, who coordinates LCCC's version of ASAP, known as SAIL (Students Accelerating In Learning) said the only way Lorain would achieve its goals would be to take the best ideas from elsewhere

and tailor them to their campus. "We know we're not New York City," Mercado said. "We don't have the funds that they have. We don't have mass transit to give out MetroCards. But that doesn't mean we can't take the framework of the CUNY program and adapt it."

What LCCC did have was the ability to track its progress through data and partner with other colleges. To build Lorain's SAIL program, CUNY provided technical assistance and the Ohio Department of Higher Education shepherded the sharing of information among the three state institutions that participated. Components of the CUNY program were tweaked to make it work in Ohio. For instance, instead of MetroCards, Lorain provided $50 gift cards to students to use at a chain of local grocery stores and gas stations.

In the end, the results from SAIL closely matched those from New York: graduation rates of students in Lorain's program as well as those at the other two Ohio community colleges more than doubled after two years, according to a study by MDRC, a nonprofit research group.

Champion student success efforts on campus with the president as the leader.

The strategic priorities of an institution are often tied to a president and usually last only as long as a specific leader remains in the top role. With the average tenure of a college president just shy of seven years, institutions need to move quickly to reorient campus services, knowing the reforms will take years to show progress.

Colleges known for their student success innovations usually have a president who takes an active role in establishing support for reforms and getting buy-in from internal and external constituencies. Key to this approach is a decisive leader who makes it clear that student success is a high priority, or in some cases gives a nudge to stalled efforts.

Ballinger has played all those roles, first as provost at Lorain, and now as president. When some faculty members and deans wanted to take an incremental approach to scaling co-requisite courses, Ballinger pushed them to move faster because the data indicated the college was ready. When Ballinger saw the results of the SAIL pilot, she wondered if it could be expanded to reach upwards of a thousand students rather than a few hundred. While the program had its limits—it was designed only for full-time students eligible for a Pell Grant—there were elements that could be scaled. One of them was advising.

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Lorain was already in the midst of wholesale changes to its advising model. Previously, students weren't required to meet with an advisor, but when they did, they had multiple advisors, depending on their specific questions. Under a new advising model, the college spent a year training its advisors to understand the various needs of students and giving them the technological tools to manage caseloads of 250 to 300 students. Now students are assigned an advisor within days of being accepted to the college and are required to meet with that advisor.

The revamp of advising was part of a wider cultural change that Ballinger tried to cultivate at the college. Gone were the days when students could choose cafeteria-style from a menu of majors and courses with little guidance about how to get through college and out at the end with a degree. In its place, the college created nine meta-majors that group majors under a larger academic umbrella (business, for instance, instead of accounting). Students start out in one of the meta majors before eventually picking a specific

major.

"We wanted everyone to know that student success was a core value," Ballinger said. "I was relentless that this is our priority so that everyone on campus, no matter their role, knew it."

Assemble a core college-wide team focused on student success efforts with clear goals.

Among the biggest obstacles to moving the needle on student success are the daily demands of running an institution. Those demands constantly push against the longer term priorities of improving retention and graduation rates. In addition, too many good ideas and projects fail on campuses because they have only one champion, who might move on to other projects or leave the institution for another job, or because they are assigned to staff members who already have a full-time job.

Lorain created a campus-wide team to oversee the work on student success to break down the administrative and academic silos that exist on campuses. From that team, smaller groups were formed to get specific projects completed, such as overhauling the registration system or reorganizing developmental courses.

As the initial investments and reforms in student services and academic supports started to pay off with higher rates of success, LCCC's leaders started to think about what was needed to keep the movement going into the next decade. In the fall of 2018, the college kicked off a "visioning" process.

Unlike previous strategic planning efforts that took the college two years to complete and produced static documents with lists of goals, Ballinger wanted this endeavor to be different. For one, it would move quickly, producing a plan within the course of a single academic year—a timeline almost unheard of in higher education. Second, it would involve the community to create a "shared vision" for the region. Third, it would be a "living document" that evolved as milestones were reached. And finally it would have a bold goal.

Over the course of nine months, more than 1,500 people participated in some eighty sessions about the trends shaping the college and the community and to generate ideas for the future. From that process, the college created a Vision Network of more than 120 community and campus leaders to sift through the input that was gathered and focus on the mega trends that would help the college land on a specific plan. That plan, approved in the spring of 2019, calls for the college awarding 10,000 degrees or certificates by 2025.

The four approaches that evolved from Lorain's journey to improving student success provide a roadmap for other institutions. Not all are right for a given college or university. But if campuses can figure out which ones would work for them, they'll be on their way to helping not only more of their students succeed, but also improve the financial underpinnings of the institution and its overall public standing.

"This is a long, slow process," Ballinger said. "Change doesn't happen over night. We've been at this for eight years, and we are finally seeing the results."