COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH CENTER
CCRC BRIEF

How Non-Academic Supports Work: Four Mechanisms for Improving Student Outcomes

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College success requires more than the ability to master college-level academic skills. Students must learn to navigate an unfamiliar campus, satisfy bureaucratic requirements, meet new expectations (Shields, 2002), and engage in new types of interpersonal relationships (Dickie & Farrell, 1991). Academically vulnerable students—those who are most likely to encounter difficulties in understanding and enacting college expectations—are often enrolled at two-year colleges and open-access, four-year commuter colleges. Improving non-academic support systems at these institutions could improve outcomes for students at risk of postsecondary failure.

Non-academic support activities are presumed to encourage academic success but are not overtly academic. While structured programs that encourage non-academic support often also have an academic component, academic and non-academic supports address different skills and encourage student success via different processes. This Brief, based on a longer literature review, identifies the processes by which non-academic supports can help students remain enrolled in college, earn good grades, and earn a credential. Identifying these processes allows a deeper understanding of how interventions may help create successful college students and the conditions that may lead students to become "integrated" or "committed." By articulating the processes by which non-academic supports help students succeed, this Brief also provides practitioners with a better understanding of the elements necessary for successful non-academic support efforts.

The major theories of student persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993) argue, in various ways, that persistence in postsecondary education is influenced by a combination of pre-existing characteristics, external forces, and institutional factors. They also argue that to stay enrolled, students must believe that higher education is an important part of their lives, and that this belief is harder to develop for nontraditional students, including part-time, commuter, and older students. These theories—particularly Tinto's—are the dominant frame through which researchers and practitioners view student success, but they provide little guidance for community colleges. Because they are based on the experiences of students for whom the four-year, residential model—replete with opportunities for integration

and connectedness—is the norm, they do not accurately represent the experiences of many students attending two-year institutions. Further, many of the dominant theories lack a clear understanding of how student persistence occurs. Empirical tests of theories rooted in Tinto's integration framework demonstrate that integration and commitment are related to student success, but they do not explain how students become integrated. Many efforts to put these theories into practice have floundered due to an incomplete understanding of what contexts, structures, and experiences lead to students' postsecondary integration. This Brief aims to extend these theories by shifting attention toward the mechanisms by which student success occurs.

Non-Academic Support Mechanisms

This Brief uses the evaluation literature to interrogate our current understanding of student persistence and to propose a more process-oriented framework of non-academic support. One hundred twenty-eight books, journal articles, and reports were reviewed and grouped based on the common components of studies. In an analysis of these texts, four mechanisms that appear to encourage student success emerged: creating social relationships, clarifying aspirations and enhancing commitment, developing college know-how, and making college life feasible.

Creating Social Relationships

Meaningful social relationships promote persistence by helping students feel comfortable in college and by providing them access to important information. Promoting social relationships is particularly important for nontraditional students, who often have fewer opportunities to create them on their own due to competing demands on their time.

The theoretical literature supports the notion that nontraditional students need help developing social connections to postsecondary education. Tinto (1993), among others, emphasizes the difficulty that students have in remaining enrolled if they do not become socially connected. According to Bensimon (2007), "institutional agents" can encourage student success by providing interpersonal connections, advice, motivation, and information. Similarly, research on social networks and social capital suggests that relationships can be used to access valuable information that can promote success in educational endeavors (Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1974).

Empirical studies provide evidence that students in learning communities—which aim to foster relationships by assigning students to a cohort that takes a pair or group of courses together—are more likely to participate in college activities (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008) and to report a sense of belonging on campus (Scrivener et al., 2008).

Some evidence suggests that well-implemented learning communities can also support learning outcomes; Lichtenstein (2005) found that students in learning communities characterized by supportive classrooms and strong interpersonal relationships had higher grades and retention rates than both students in learning communities that did not promote such connections and students who did not participate in learning communities. Notably, relationships must be meaningful in order to help students feel connected to school or feel comfortable enough to leverage them to gain information (Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2010).

Activities that help students interact with one another or with professors over a prolonged period of time seem to encourage this mechanism best. Well-implemented learning communities help create relationships because students spend a significant amount of time together and often have shared interests. Likewise, student success courses, which aim to help students acclimate to college, access information, and get to know faculty and peers, may support the development of social relationships. There is evidence associating these courses with connections between students, faculty, and staff (O'Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2009; Tinto, 1993) and positive student outcomes (Strumpf & Hunt, 1993; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007). Other strategies can encourage this mechanism outside of specific interventions and courses. Interactive pedagogy, required study groups, or mandatory meetings and communication with professors can help students develop meaningful social connections.

Clarifying Aspirations and Enhancing Commitment

Students who do not have clear goals and a genuine understanding of why college is worthwhile are likely to be derailed by minor challenges and setbacks (Grubb, 2006). Helping students crystallize their goals and understand how college can help them achieve these goals may increase the likelihood that they will persist and earn a credential.

Tinto (1993) and Bean and Metzner (1985) argue that students must become committed to an institution and postsecondary education in order to remain enrolled. According to Tinto, commitment develops when students have positive interactions with their college environments. Bean and Metzner argue that for nontraditional students, psychological variables—such as utility (perceiving college as useful for employment), satisfaction (enjoying being a student), and goal commitment (feeling that a college education is important)—have a large influence on persistence. Several studies suggest that college students, particularly those at community colleges, are strongly oriented toward the utility of postsecondary education (Cox, 2009a, 2009b; Grubb, 2006). Students who do not see the value in their coursework often behave in counterproductive ways and may fail to complete assignments or drop required courses.

Some evidence suggests that advising activities improve student outcomes when they help students develop a concrete set of steps for attaining their goals and help them understand how courses relate to these goals. Bahr (2008) and Metzner (1989) both found that advising positively influenced completion of remedial courses, persistence rates, and transfer rates after controlling for preexisting characteristics. Visher, Butcher, and Cerna (2010) found modestly positive results from enhanced advising activities, which provide students with more intensive and personalized guidance than is typical in the community college setting.

Since colleges often have difficulty implementing enhanced advising, alternative methods are needed to help students clarify their goals and identify steps for achieving them. Student success courses are a promising vehicle for this, as they allow students to engage in major and career exploration, program planning, and course advising over multiple weeks with an instructor who has the opportunity to know them well. Moreover, delivering services to 30 students in one classroom is more resource-efficient than providing 30 students with individual advising sessions.

Developing College Know-How

To navigate college, students must understand the unwritten rules of the postsecondary environment. Tinto (1993) argues that students must learn and internalize these rules in order to persist, and he even implies that failure to persist is due more often to poor internalization of the culture of postsecondary education than to poor academic performance. Bourdieu (1973) discusses the importance of cultural capital, which involves the accumulation of the types of knowledge that are most valued in a given cultural context. In postsecondary education, this includes knowing how to ask for help, how to participate in class appropriately, and how to navigate bureaucratic systems to access resources, such as financial aid. Cultural capital is generally defined and possessed by dominant groups, which puts nontraditional students from other backgrounds at a disadvantage. Lacking cultural capital might negatively impact their academic outcomes or make them feel uncomfortable enough to exit postsecondary education.

Providing students with college know-how may improve outcomes, but it is not frequently done on college campuses. Giving students accurate and clear information is a challenge, since guidance and counseling services in colleges are overburdened and underfunded, and efforts to disseminate information are often not well-coordinated. Student success courses may be a useful vehicle for providing basic information in a timely, efficient manner. In addition, streamlining students' options and better structuring their choices may make college easier to navigate (Scott-Clayton, 2010).

Teaching students how to enact upper-middle-class expectations in the classroom could greatly enhance student outcomes, but this strategy must be employed with sensitivity. It must not be suggested—even implicitly or unintentionally—that upper-middle-class culture is preferable to students' home cultures. Rather, in helping students to acquire cultural capital, it should be made clear that postsecondary education has a distinct set of expectations and norms that can be learned and enacted in order to further their educational goals.

Making College Life Feasible

Community college students often experience unanticipated challenges involving conflicts between the demands of work, family, and school. Services that aid students in overcoming these challenges help ensure that students' educational pursuits are not compromised.

Bean and Metzner (1985) argue that hours of employment, family responsibilities, and outside encouragement directly affect student dropout, academic outcomes, and intent to leave—especially for nontraditional

students. Braxton et al. (2004) also argue that for commuter students, external forces such as work and family exert a strong influence on persistence, but they suggest that students who feel that their institution cares about their welfare are more likely to persist. It follows, then, that helping students balance conflicting demands can improve academic outcomes.

Because students have diverse needs, a wide array of non-academic supports can help make college life feasible. For example, offering on-site daycare would help minimize the conflict between family and school, particularly for female students. Offering courses at a variety of times and providing on-campus work opportunities may improve student retention at commuter institutions (Braxton et al., 2004). Additionally, providing transportation assistance may improve attendance and alleviate a significant financial burden (Martinez & Castañeda-Calleros, 2009).

Discussion and Conclusion

While current theories of student persistence examine the effects of non-academic support, they generally do not examine how support is generated. This Brief has identified four mechanisms by which non-academic supports can improve student outcomes: creating social relationships, clarifying aspirations and enhancing commitment, developing college know-how, and making college life feasible. Shifting attention toward the mechanisms by which students become integrated and committed represents an important theoretical step forward. Furthermore, rooting the mechanisms in research conducted with academically vulnerable students at commuter and two-year institutions accounts for students who are usually excluded from theories of persistence. These developments have immediate implications for research and practice.

Future Research

Further research is needed to understand the relationship between non-academic support mechanisms and positive student outcomes. Non-academic support activities are frequently coupled with academic interventions. Presumably, this combination may create an interaction effect, and research may reveal ways for community colleges to capitalize on this. It is also unclear if different types of students require different supports, and research in this area could allow colleges to better match students with different interventions.

It is important to keep in mind that efforts to implement non-academic supports may be moot if we do not understand how students perceive these efforts. Students create their own understandings of college, which influences their learning and their perceptions of attempts to improve their outcomes. If students do not view the information they are given as useful, for example, or if they do not find their social interactions meaningful, they are unlikely to capitalize on these mechanisms. A better understanding of student reactions to non-academic support activities and research linking student perceptions to their academic outcomes is therefore an area that is ripe for research.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Community college reform efforts are typically limited to implementing new programs, which often have little broad impact. *Efforts to improve persistence should focus on processes, not programs.* Participating in a program will not improve outcomes unless the program is well-implemented; otherwise, students may not be sufficiently exposed to the mechanisms described here. In examining reform efforts, colleges should determine whether students have the opportunity to engage in the four non-academic support mechanisms. The following are recommended practices that shift the delivery of information and the locus of relationship-building within a college, helping to ensure that all students encounter non-academic supports. None of these recommendations, it should be noted, are program-specific.

- *Redesign advising and counseling so that it is streamlined and personalized*. Students need access to good information, but current counseling structures and college budgets cannot support frequent individual advising sessions. Advising can be streamlined through expanded student success courses, which can be used to give students information about program planning procedures, financial aid, and other issues commonly discussed in advising sessions. Delivering this information to an entire classroom at once would give advisors more time to address individual issues in one-on-one sessions. Technology might also be used to create efficient yet personal information sources. A well-developed and truly interactive website, for example, could relieve college counselors of many course-scheduling activities, freeing them to work in more depth with students in need. But since research indicates that students need a "human touch" (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2009; Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine, 2010), too much reliance on technology for advising may be counterproductive, and innovations should be implemented thoughtfully.
- *Make non-academic supports intrusive so that students are forced to encounter them.* Students are often unaware that they need non-academic support, and some may regard the use of support services as an indication that they "do not belong in college." Making non-academic support an integral part of every student's experience means that all students will receive help, even if they think they do not need it. Intrusive supports can involve making participation in advising or student success courses mandatory. Non-academic supports can also be integrated into academic curriculum. College faculty trained in pedagogies that encourage relationship-building can help students develop college skills and cultural capital.
- *Create more structure within the community college.* Greater structure may reduce the need for intensive support by simplifying students' choices and minimizing how many decision points they encounter (Scott-Clayton, 2010). Strategically increasing the structure of non-academic supports—by organizing programs in ways that create cohorts or faculty-student relationships spanning multiple semesters—could help ensure that such supports are widespread and easily accessed.

The four mechanisms identified in this Brief can be implemented formally or informally, but it is essential that students be exposed to them—ideally through a broad strategy that structures such support into their daily lives as

college students. All students—even those who are ostensibly academically prepared—need help navigating the world of postsecondary education, and institutions can improve student outcomes by ensuring that non-academic supports promote these mechanisms.

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