# COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH CENTER

# CCRC BRIEF

## Community College Management Practices That Promote Student Success

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There has been surprisingly little rigorous research on institutional effectiveness in community colleges. Even the much larger body of research on institutional effectiveness among baccalaureate-granting institutions in general tells us more about the student characteristics and institutional features (e.g., selectivity, size, resources) associated with positive student outcomes than about the policies and practices affecting student success that are under a college's control. A key problem in this research is how to compare the performance of different institutions serving student bodies with different characteristics.

Several recent studies have sought to examine the policies and practices of undergraduate institutions that perform better than would be expected given their students' characteristics (Muraskin & Lee, 2004; Carey, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005). While these studies offer insight into institutional effectiveness in baccalaureate-granting institutions, the applicability of their findings to community colleges is questionable. They also suffer from a number of data and methodological limitations.

This Brief summarizes a study by the Community College Research Center of community college management practices that promote student success. This study addresses the limitations of previous research on the effectiveness of undergraduate institutions in several ways. It takes advantage of a rich set of longitudinal student unit record data to control for the individual characteristics of the students that the colleges serve. Because the study is based on the outcomes of both full-time and part-time students, our measure of institutional effectiveness is better suited to community colleges and their

students than is the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) "student-right-to-know" measure commonly used by other studies. We also measured student persistence in addition to completion and transfer, which is appropriate given that community college students often take a long time to complete their programs or to transfer. Our sample is confined to all community colleges in a single state, thus eliminating the effects on institutional performance of variations in public policy and institutional mission, practice, and resources across states.

While some previous studies examined only institutions considered to be high performers, we directly compared colleges found to have a relatively high impact on the educational success of their students with colleges that have a low impact. Moreover, this study, unlike others, seeks to account for changes in colleges' policies and practices over time.

## Research Hypotheses

To frame this study of community college effectiveness, we drew on previous research to develop a set of seven hypotheses about the ways that we expected that those community colleges more effective in promoting their students' educational success would differ from those with a less positive impact on student success. Specifically, we hypothesized that community colleges would be more effective if they do the following:

***Have an institutional focus on student retention and outcomes, not just on enrollment.*** Effective community colleges would actively focus on student retention and outcomes, while less effective colleges would be primarily concerned about enrollment. Funding for community colleges (and for public higher education institutions generally) is largely based on enrollments, rather than on completions or other outcomes, so it is not surprising that community colleges often pay more attention to the former than the latter.

***Offer targeted support for underperforming students.*** Where there are systemic gaps between the outcomes of different student groups, as is typically the case between minority and White students, effective colleges would undertake targeted efforts to address them.

***Have well-designed, well-aligned, and proactive student support services.*** Effective community colleges would offer student services that guide and support students from enrollment to completion, using technology and other means *proactively* to reach out to students who are at risk of dropping out.

***Provide support for faculty development focused on improving teaching.*** Effective colleges would devote more attention and resources to helping faculty—particularly the adjuncts who make up the majority of faculty at most community colleges—become better teachers, particularly for students who are academically unprepared and/or from minority populations. Given that the majority of instructors in most community colleges are part time, we hypothesized that effective colleges would take steps to orient and prepare adjunct instructors and monitor the quality of their teaching.

***Experiment with ways to improve the effectiveness of instruction and support services.*** Effective community colleges would experiment with better ways to teach and support students, particularly those with academic deficiencies. Moreover, they would find ways to improve the outcomes of developmental programs because so many students are required to take remedial or developmental courses, and because many students who take those courses fail to advance to and succeed in degree credit coursework. Effective colleges would also be more likely to evaluate the impact of efforts to improve student learning and success and to use the findings to inform further improvements in practice.

***Use institutional research to track student outcomes and improve program impact.*** Effective community colleges would collect data on student outcomes and use them to evaluate and manage programs and services in ways that improve student success. This hypothesis is based on the premise of organizational management that "you measure what you value," and its corollary, "you don't value what you don't measure." A recent CCRC survey on community college institutional research found that relatively few colleges collect data on student outcomes, other than what is required for compliance and accountability. Even fewer colleges use data on student outcomes to inform decisions about how to organize and deliver programs and services (Morest, Soonachan, Reid, Crosta, & Leinbach, forthcoming).

***Manage the institution in ways that promote systemic improvement in student success.*** More effective community colleges would approach institutional management with a strategic focus on improving student outcomes. They would have systems, policies, and procedures for program review, strategic planning, and budgeting that are guided by evidence of what works to promote student success and that are designed to foster systemic improvements in the impact of the college's academic programs and student services on students.

Taken together, the elements of institutional policy, practice, and culture defined by these hypotheses form a model of community college institutional effectiveness that we tested through this study. What connects these hypotheses is the idea that effective community colleges deliberately and systematically manage programs and support services in ways that optimize the impact of the college's limited resources on student success. Making effective use of resources is especially important to community colleges because a high proportion of community college students are poorly prepared for college and therefore more costly to serve than well-prepared students, and yet community colleges have relatively few resources to serve their students (compared with four-year institutions). From this perspective, a college's effectiveness in serving students results less from whether it adopts particular policies or practices than from how well it aligns and manages all its programs and services to support student success.

## Research Design

We used transcript-level data on over 150,000 students in three cohorts of first-time Florida community college students (those who enrolled in the fall of 1998, 1999, and 2000, respectively) and a regression methodology to estimate the effect that each of Florida's 28 community colleges had on the probability, after controlling for individual student characteristics, of minority students' graduating, transferring to a Florida public university, or persisting. This effect can be seen as a measure of value added—the impact that a college has on its students' educational success independent of the characteristics of individual

students. We then ranked the colleges according to their estimated effects on student success.

We used these rankings to select six colleges for field research: three that had high impacts on the chances that their minority students would succeed and three that had low impacts. The goal of the fieldwork was to compare the institutional policies, practices, and cultural characteristics of the high- and low-impact colleges during the period in which the student cohorts were tracked (from academic year 1998-1999 through 2002-2003) to determine why some colleges had a greater net effect on their minority students' educational success than did others. Thus, in interviews, we focused our questions on what had taken place in the past, so as to match the time period of data we used to select the colleges.

## Findings and Conclusions

Our findings are summarized in Table 1. They indicate that the dimensions of our model of community college effectiveness where there is the clearest difference between the high- and low-impact colleges are under "Targeted support for minority students," specifically "Minority-inclusive campus environment" and "Specialized retention services for minority students." Thus, minority community college students are more likely to succeed at colleges where they are made to feel welcome and where there are support services and programs specifically designed for them.

At the three low-impact colleges, some respondents argued that community colleges should not give preferential treatment to any one group because many if not most community college students face barriers to success in college. Others at these colleges, and particularly some (but not all) of the minority staff and faculty we interviewed, maintained, conversely, that, because there are persistent gaps in achievement between minority and White students, minority students need targeted support to help close these gaps. The findings from this study support this latter position.

The findings also suggest that, to promote the success of students generally (including minority students), not only do particular student support services, such as in-depth orientations, proactive advising, early warning systems, and well-organized academic support services, need to be in place, but they must be well aligned and coordinated across the campus. While administrators may see different functional areas of the college as providing discrete services, students do not see, nor should they experience, such divisions. Seamless integration of services from the student's perspective and collaboration among faculty, staff, and administration in providing these services are what seem to contribute most to student success.

The study also supports the overarching hypothesis that the key to a college's

| | **Table 1.**<br>**Development of Community College Institutional Effectiveness**<br>**Model Elements During the Study Period:**<br>**High- and Low-Impact Colleges Compared** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Model Element** | **High-Impact Colleges** | | | **Low-Impact Colleges** | | |
| | **A** | **B** | **C** | **A** | **B** | **C** |
| 1. Institutional focus on student retention and outcomes, not just enrollment | + | ~ | 0 | ~ | 0 | 0 |
| 2. Targeted support for minority students:<br>a. Clear commitment by college's leadership | + | ~ | 0 | + | 0 | 0 |
| b. Minority-inclusive campus environment | + | + | + | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| c. Outreach to improve college access by minority students | + | + | + | + | + | ~ |
| d. Specialized retention services for minority students | + | + | + | 0 | ~ | 0 |
| e. Active recruitment of minority faculty and staff | + | ~ | 0 | + | 0 | 0 |
| 3. Well-designed, well-aligned, and proactive student support services | + | ~ | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 4. Support for faculty development focused on improving teaching | ~ | ~ | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 5. Experimentation with ways to improve the effectiveness of instruction and support services | + | ~ | 0 | ~ | 0 | ~ |
| 6. Use of institutional research to track student outcomes and improve program impact | + | ~ | 0 | ~ | 0 | 0 |
| 7. Institutional management processes designed to promote systemic improvement in student success | + | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

KEY:
+ = policy, practice, or cultural characteristic well developed during the study period.
~ = policy, practice, or cultural characteristic was developing during the study period.
0 = policy, practice, or cultural characteristic weakly developed or nonexistent during the study period.

effectiveness is not whether it adopts particular policies or practices, but how well it aligns and manages all of its programs and services to support student success. Small-scale, "boutique" programs or pilots may represent important sources of innovation for a college in the long term, but they are unlikely by themselves to have much of a direct impact on overall institutional effectiveness.

In the three years since the end of the study period, all of the six colleges we visited have adopted a fuller set of the elements of our model of institutional effectiveness. All have sought to strengthen and better align student services. All but one of the colleges have strengthened their systems for evaluating and improving practices based on student performance data. These developments show that colleges can and do change the way they operate, but they also show that bringing about such changes requires some internal or external catalyst and that change generally takes a long time. In every case, the groundwork for the recent changes was laid during the study period. In one case it took nearly a decade for the college's leadership to change the mindset of faculty and staff from a primary focus on access and enrollments to a concern for student retention and degree completion as well.

The fact that the colleges are operating in some substantially different ways three years after our study period supports our approach of focusing the field research on what the colleges were doing during the study period, not what they are doing now. We acknowledge that it is not easy to reconstruct through interviews and document reviews a college's policies and practice during a period that started eight years prior. Still, to have focused our field research on the colleges' current practice while the data we used to select the colleges were from an earlier period would have produced misleading findings.

This study shows that comparing the performance of different institutions is complicated and should be approached with caution. Straightforward comparisons of institutional performance are misleading because each college serves a different mix of students and has different characteristics such as size, level of resources, and program mix that bear on performance. In this study, we used a rich set of longitudinal data on cohorts of first-time students to control for the effect of individual student characteristics and behaviors on student outcomes. Our purpose in examining the relative performance of institutions was to set up field work designed to identify the policies and practices that distinguish community colleges that have a higher impact on the success of students (in this case of minority students) from those that have a lower impact. For colleges seeking to gauge whether they are doing well or need to improve, a better benchmark than the performance of other institutions is probably each college's own historical performance.

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