Increasing the Odds of Success

There is a great deal at stake today for higher education—for our students, our faculty, and our institutions. But we have a tool that can move us toward success. Analytics promises to help us better address the need for accountability, affordability, productivity, and student success. It offers insight and the possibility of better decision making. With the trends, predictions, patterns, and interventions revealed through analytics, we can increase our odds of success.

Increasing the odds of success is behind Arizona State University’s adoption of analytics. ASU President Michael M. Crow explains: “Without analytics, we can’t understand what’s going on, we can’t understand the complexity of what we’re trying to do, and we can’t measure our progress. We needed tools to help us make better decisions—about everything.”

Analytics allows students to understand how their behaviors are linked to learning outcomes. We have data—lots of it—to use in analytics. We should be actively using that data to help our students. As Mark David Milliron advises in his “Open Letter to Students”: “Rest assured that the local, state, and federal levels are all getting data about you . . . and using it for their purposes. ... You have the right to push your college/university to use your data first to help you. Amazon uses your data to suggest books. Facebook uses your data to suggest friends. iTunes uses your data to suggest playlists. Guess what? Your college/university can and should use your data to suggest ways to better navigate your learning path, regulate your learning experiences, and access your learning resources and supports.”

Analytics allows faculty to see patterns of success or disengagement in student populations, extrapolating to the future using predictive models. Data is input to tools that allow us to apply “descriptive, inferential, and predictive analyses to the massive number of individualized digital records at a transactional level,” according to Ellen Wagner and Phil Ice in their article “Data Changes Everything.” The authors add: “Although it would be inaccurate to suggest that educational experience is an amalgamation of transactions just waiting to be mined, analyzing student information to better understand learning and motivational patterns may, in fact, offer opportunities for reconsidering how to optimize educational experiences that promote and enable student success.”

Analytics allows institution leaders to make better decisions about energy utilization, financial models, and staffing. In “Policy Dimensions of Analytics in Higher Education,” Rodney J. Petersen observes: “There is an increasing recognition of the inherent value of data-informed decisions and the power of information technologies to create dashboards, infographics, or other snapshot views to keep governing boards, campus administrators, and faculty informed in a variety of areas—which in turn can help them spot early signs of trouble where intervention may be necessary.” Petersen continues: “Data helps to unlock the mystery about college costs, learning outcomes, institutional effectiveness, and other performance indicators.” We can improve the odds of success through analytics by paying attention to prerequisites such as sound data governance, policies, and procedures. Data access is an important—and difficult—policy issue to clarify. Who has access to the data and under what circumstances? Often-cited concerns, such as FERPA,

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not necessarily roadblocks but can indeed be tricky.

Clearly an important tool, analytics remains underutilized. Crow points out: “Our institutions have unbelievable technological capability. We have unbelievable backbone. We have everything that should enable us to be the most analytical enterprise class in the world. We’re not. We should be using analytics at all levels of the institution. . . . As a sector, U.S. higher education institutions are not taking advantage of one of our natural strengths: our technological capability and technological infrastructure. We should be highly analytical, on every possible level.”

Few institutions will be able to cope with today’s information demands or decision-making needs without analytics. Yet data and analytics are not enough by themselves. As Crow notes: “Analytics are not the end. They are the means to the end.” Wagner and Ice agree: “People still need to make the decisions.” Students, faculty, and institution leaders can use analytics to reach decisions that will increase their odds of success—making analytics a tool that we can no longer afford to ignore.

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