Student success is firmly cemented as a priority for colleges and universities. The goal has occupied a top spot in the EDUCAUSE Top 10 IT issues list for several years. In 2019, Student Success was #2, and Student-Centered Institution was #4. The shifting demographics of college/university students, higher education institutions’ performance funding, a volatile and rapidly changing workforce, new generations of technologies, and access to data about every dimension of a student’s journey to a degree are all factors that shape the contours of the mission to ensure that students finish what they start.
In states with performance funding, which offers financial incentives based on key outcomes, retention and graduation can be the North Star by which all initiatives are measured. In many institutions, no matter the funding model, the changing population of students entering college with more diverse needs and varying levels of preparedness has caused leaders to shift the focus from enrollment to completion. Vice president positions are being created with “student success” in the title and purview. These moves appear to be working: the National Student Clearinghouse reports an increase of 1.5 percent in the overall national six-year graduation rate for both two- and four-year colleges in the most recent (fall 2012) cohort—rising to 58.3 percent. Promising gains have also been seen for black and Hispanic students, suggesting the importance of programs designed to address the achievement gap. Beyond completion, it’s difficult to put a finger on a field-wide definition of student success.

At a high level, progression and graduation make sense, representing the US attention to the completion agenda. Educational attainment has been linked to higher income, more job satisfaction, and lower unemployment, with additional societal benefits such as increased tax revenue, improved public health, and greater civic engagement. Of course, we want our students to graduate. Many practitioners and researchers are doing important work to unpack, better understand, and address student success. For now, questions remain for how we can help students finish what they start—in particular, the following three “big questions”:

- What does student success mean, both for the institution and for the student?
- How do we measure student success?
- Is student success a mission-critical philosophy for higher education institutions, or should student success be owned by one (or a few) functional areas? What should the campus structures that support student success look like?

What Does Student Success Really Mean?
Exploring the completion agenda a bit further surfaces the complexity lying underneath the goals of retention and graduation. First, the path to graduation may not always be clear cut. Confusing curricula, wasted transfer credits, limited course availability, restrictive accessibility issues, and other structural barriers may hinder a student’s ability to efficiently navigate a degree program. Nonacademic barriers such as food or housing insecurity and mental health issues also impact retention and persistence rates. Additionally, community college students may more often face challenges such as a lack of transportation and/or child care. Powerful links between a student’s sense of belonging and successful student outcomes have also been demonstrated. Despite the fact that students spend most of their time on campus in a classroom, these factors all go well beyond traditional academic support programs or interventions, many of which assume that a deficit in academic skills is what keeps students from being successful.

The complexity of factors related to a student's
ability to complete a degree program represents just one aspect of the barrier to student success. Another wicked problem arises from the definition of success. Should we assume that the completion of a two- or four-year degree is—and should be—the goal for every individual? What does success look like, in a broader sense?

The question of the impetus behind completing a degree does not yield a simple answer. Many students cite job outcomes as a primary motivator; however, today’s students are also likely to speak to the nuances of this goal, including wanting to become a productive member of society. These aspirations of becoming an educated citizen might well include a “good job,” but they also incorporate an exploration of purpose and engagement: connecting with ideas and wrestling with problems that are important to them. Older adults, even those seeking career mobility through education, also seem guided by the need to find a passion or a purpose. Given the research that shows students will likely have 10–14 jobs before they reach 40 years old, and far more by the time they leave the workforce, we must attend to students’ drive to connect with a purpose and to institutions’ ability to help students identify and work toward that purpose.

The rapidly changing workforce also creates a need for alternative credentialing pathways for students. Employers are increasingly turning to skills-based hiring, and in quickly changing professions like healthcare or technology, existing employees must continue to upskill. Older students living independently or supporting families may desire to immediately apply new knowledge and skills to gain promotions or new jobs. Stackable digital credentials are one way to showcase those skills to prospective employers during, after, or instead of completion of a two- or four-year degree. But as alternative credentials have moved into the mainstream, with an estimated 334,000 in the market today, the use of methods to signal the value of these credentials is critical. Meanwhile, employers also seem to be placing an increasing importance on college degrees, and nearly half indicate they have raised the level of the minimum degree required for the same job roles over the last five years.

Finally, when we explore the definition of student success, we must examine not only the purpose and outcomes of a college education but also the student experience. Can we say we have achieved student success when students—particularly students of color—are increasingly graduating but also report an alienating or upsetting experience along the way? This question combines various issues: students’ ability to find a sense of belonging on campus; the identification and connection of purpose to the student’s course of study, skills gained, and post-college aspirations; and ultimately, the question of how we measure student success.

**How Do We Measure Student Success?**

As noted earlier, retention and graduation are often the hallmarks of student success metrics. These metrics are still critical to observe, especially in the context of the statistic that 40 percent of students do not graduate. However, if we are measuring only retention and graduation, we lose the opportunity to learn if what we are doing to support student success is working and to make any needed course corrections. Retention and graduation are lagging indicators, looking back on something that has already happened. They fail to offer information about where and why a student has fallen off the pathway to degree completion, and they don’t provide
any policy or practice guidance that could improve these outcomes.

Instead of looking backward at lagging indicators, we might consider identifying leading indicators and integrating those into our practice. Some leading indicators might be institution-specific, based on the particular context on campus, and can be discovered through predictive modeling. A starting point might be to look at leading indicators that have been identified across contexts, such as completion of gateway courses, credit accumulation, and full-time continuous enrollment. Even more actionable indicators include behaviors such as timely registration, early and/or frequent activity in the learning management system, and participation in advising appointments.

In addition, campuses must commit to disaggregating data so that differences between subgroups can be identified and addressed accordingly with sensitivity to cultural or other contexts. For example, differences likely exist between transfer students, first-generation students, and part-time students. Even more specifically, examining data for racial subgroups separately

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**The EDUCAUSE Student Success Program**

**Definition**

Student success community programs promote student engagement, learning, and progress toward the student’s own goals through cross-functional leadership and the strategic application of technology.

**Areas of Focus**

- **Organizational and Culture Change:** Change the organizational structure as required to effect a reorientation toward students, which might mean a shift away from rankings, research, or other institutionally focused activities that have been embedded in the institutional culture for decades.

- **Leadership and Change Management:** Clearly define outcomes, and align the institution toward this shared goal; inspire and reinforce behavior changes in individuals and teams to get there.

- **Business Process Improvement:** Create clear and efficient processes, handoffs, and communications between departments, and deploy knowledge management systems to ensure consistency and effective delivery—from the perspective of the student.

- **Advising and Student Support Systems:** Elevate the role of advisor, and empower faculty and/or professional advising staff with information, tools, and professional development opportunities.

- **Data Capabilities:** Set up enterprise systems to collect, analyze, and apply data; create self-learning systems that are refined through evaluation data.

- **Learning Environments:** Identify and assess toward learning outcomes; provide faculty with development opportunities to improve teaching and assessment; share teaching innovation and best practices.

- **Continuous Improvement and Evaluation:** Articulate intended outcomes, define and measure leading indicators and KPIs, and make improvements to systems, services, processes, and technology based on these data; create a data-informed culture.

**Pillars**

- **Whole Student.** A student’s ability to progress through a learning experience and demonstrate learning has as much to do with socioemotional, physical, and financial factors as it does with intellectual skills. The coordination of advising, curriculum, teaching, and academic support services allows the institution to serve the individual as a whole student.

- **Advising and Co-Curricular Supports.** As technology generates increased information about student progress and learning, a mindful approach to a coordinated advising function becomes more prominent in institutions. Successful advising and planning reforms require strategic collaboration across the institution, with alignment to mission and an openness to transformative institutional change rather than merely the adoption of new technology.

Innovation practices like design thinking place the student at the center while testing and iterating into scalable, feasible, impactful interventions.

- **Student Success Technologies.** Information about student progress, learning, and potential risk areas made available to the student and to the institution can increase student agency and enable transformative conversations with faculty, advisors, and other support staff. Actionable insights enable personalized, just-in-time support for the whole student. Student privacy and data security are upheld through thoughtful, well-informed policies and practices.
can show critical differences between Asian, Native, Hispanic/Latinx, and black students. When data is not disaggregated, there is the potential to reinforce bias or to wash out differences between groups—thus missing opportunities to improve programs, services, and support and to better understand the context and story of those particular students.

Finally, even the indicators listed above, while more actionable than outcomes such as retention and graduation, represent “institutional success.” How can we examine and measure student success from the perspective of the individual student? Are there scalable approaches that can rate student progress against students’ own goals, and are there systems to deliver personalized support toward those goals?

**Campus Structures for Student Success: Philosophy or Function?**

Related to the definition of student success is the question of who “owns” the responsibility for ensuring improvements to student success. On the one hand, an institution might approach student success from an institution-wide, philosophical perspective: “Student success is everyone’s responsibility.” This commitment to keeping the student first in strategic and tactical decisions can encourage all departments to be laser-focused on one priority. On the other hand is the response: “If everyone owns it, no one owns it.” The laser focus can become diffused when there is no single responsible department or leader.

Obviously, the answer to the question of philosophy vs. function can be “both.” Institutions can be student-focused and create a culture in which every decision is mediated by a reflection about what’s best for the student. Academic advising staff and technologies can serve as a key lever for outreach and resource delivery. In fact, cross-institutional collaboration is critical to moving student success efforts forward, and one department alone cannot carry the full weight. In *iPass: Lessons from the Field*, institutions participating in a transformative, technology-based planning and advising project found that positioning student success work to align with institutional mission created momentum. Executive champions were critical, but it was the repositioning of
Student success is a complex endeavor. Colleges and universities embrace the aspiration, yet we are still grappling with big questions about how to define, measure, and structure student success, all while keeping the student at the center.

advising structures and functions that allowed the nature of advising to move from transactional to holistic. Ultimately, the iPASS institutions saw measurably improved student experiences and outcomes.6

Keeping Students at the Center
While transforming advising processes and systems constitutes an important part of this work, other institutional capacities are also leverage points. Some fundamental organizational capacities must be high-functioning and capable of the transformational change required to shift toward a student-centered mindset. The “what” that students might experience could be reflected in their just-in-time interactions with advisors, access to student success tools like degree-planning tools, or nudges they receive to complete critical tasks such as registering for courses or turning in a homework assignment. But without the “how”—for example, organizational capacities like leadership and change management,
business process improvement, continuous improvement, and data capabilities—institutional leaders may not be able to have a clear view into opportunities for improvement or the mechanisms that will effect cultural and structural change, thus limiting the ultimate results.

Taking an enterprise, student-focused view requires strategy and coordination. The capacities needed to successfully plan for and sustain student success initiatives span the entire organization, including advising, institutional research, a business intelligence function, and of course, information technology.\(^7\) Technology is one part of student success initiatives, but it’s not as simple as just plugging in a degree-planning tool. A strategically designed data ecosystem that includes a data warehouse to capture information from a variety of systems inside and outside the classroom—CRM, SIS, LMS, and even SSMS (student success management system)—and across the lifecycle, from recruitment to alumni, will enable a more complete view.\(^8\) These data points can be tied together to create one cohesive story about the student.

In addition to data systems, a strategic approach to student-facing staff, supported by back-end processes, creates a streamlined student experience. Processes should be designed to map the student experience.\(^9\) Process mapping can illuminate gaps in the student experience or, in many cases, redundant communications or extra steps. Designing technology and human systems for a seamless student experience helps students to feel known and eliminates the need to retell their stories to different staff.

At the same time, data privacy and ethics come into play here. Predictive analytics algorithms invite unintended consequences and the potential for bias, both in the algorithms and in the implementation of the results by humans. Institutional leaders need to make important decisions about who gets access to certain types of data, particularly sensitive information like mental health history. This issue can be somewhat mitigated by providing only “need to know” data to individual functions but convening a cross-functional meeting when issues of student conduct or other interventions need to be discussed. When setting up analytics systems, either in-house or with a partner, important decisions need to be made about the kind of information that is included—or intentionally excluded—from the algorithms. For example, even if demographic data can be predictive of success, some institutions are choosing not to include it in early-alert systems because it is not actionable and can reinforce racial and other biases.

Student success is a complex endeavor. Colleges and universities embrace the aspiration, yet we are still grappling with big questions about how to define, measure, and
structure student success, all while keeping the student at the center.

Notes
2. See Kevin Dougherty, Sasanya Jones, Hana Lah, Rebecca Natow, Lala Pheatt, and Vikash Reddy, Performance Funding for Higher Education (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).
17. Amelia Parnell, Darlena Jones, Alexs Wesow, and D. Christopher Brooks, “Institutions’ Use of Data and Analytics for Student Success: Results from a Landscape Analysis,” NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, the Association for Institutional Research, and EDUCAUSE, 2018.

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