

Re-Visioning Success for First-Year Students at an Urban University

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Abstract

Students entering metropolitan or urban universities differ in some notable ways from their counterparts at traditional residential colleges and universities. More importantly, they approach their college studies within a context that typically includes significant work, family, and community obligations. Faculty and staff at these institutions need to develop policies, practices, and programs that accommodate students' lifestyles and, more importantly, take advantage of the enhanced opportunities for learning and engagement provided by their locale.

What is a successful first-year college experience? The picture emerging from research on college student experiences invokes an image of a recent high school graduate leaving home to live in a well-equipped and highly functional dormitory room (modular furniture, high speed internet access, cable TV, a small refrigerator and microwave oven). The new freshman is provided an array of social programming opportunities to better acquaint her with other students and with college life. She enrolls in an interdisciplinary freshman seminar taught by a full-time faculty member who is passionate on the topic. She takes a couple of general education courses and possibly introductory offerings in her intended major. She goes to class, studies in the library and lounges throughout campus, eats with her class- and dormitory-mates, attends campus parties, and crams for mid-term and final exams. She gets involved in some campus activities—perhaps an intramural sport; an academic interest club, and a community-service activity. If successful, she emerges from this process with high grades, a better sense of direction, and a satisfying network of relationships with other students and with faculty.

What's wrong with this picture? Nothing, for those who match this portrait. However, the picture excludes the vast majority of students in US postsecondary education who do not live on campus or in off-campus student housing, who have significant lives and obligations outside of school, such as work and family, and who do not have the financial resources or family support to devote themselves entirely to their education. As several notable studies and reviews have pointed out (e.g., Metzner and Bean 1985; Kuh, Vesper, and Krehbiel 1994; Pascarella, Duby, and Iverson 1983; Pascarella and Terenzini 1998), research on student success in college is based largely on experiences of full-time, traditional-age students attending residential colleges. This perspective “treats aspects of the metropolitan student experience (e.g., competing multiple priorities, commuting to campus, working many hours a week) as—at best—irrelevant to learning or—at worst—deficits to be overcome” (Kuh, Vesper, and Krehbiel 1994, p. 15).

Despite significant attention in recent years to the “New Majority” student, the circumstances that prevent these students from having the traditional college experience are still viewed as unfavorable, disadvantaged, or otherwise negative. Kuh, Vesper, and

Krehbiel conclude that metropolitan universities “do not have [the] luxury of recruiting talented, highly motivated students who devote the bulk of their time and effort to academic activities” (p. 32). Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) lament that decreasing numbers of students in American postsecondary education are likely to experience the conditions that are the proven correlates of student success, such as small institutional size and a student body that attends college full-time and resides on campus. College rankings, such as the popular *US News and World Report* “America’s Best Colleges,” weight heavily the quality of incoming students rather than the quality of the educational experience.

Should urban and metropolitan universities do the best they can given these limitations to improve student success? Or are there more inclusive ways to envision success for the diverse array of students who attend these institutions? The purpose of this chapter is to suggest ways to re-vision the notion of first-year college student success that promotes the value of serving a range of new collegians, from the least to the most well-prepared, from the least to the most advantaged, and for students from a range of cultural backgrounds. It is not our intention to downplay the conceptions of quality that emerge from the existing literature. Rather we seek to buttress the value and contributions of institutions whose mission it is to serve a wider range of learners who approach college studies from an array of different circumstances.

Although motivated by the circumstances of urban universities, which tend to enroll a more academically and demographically diverse student population, the vision provided in this chapter, perhaps with some adaptation, can serve as a model for an array of institutions with missions that do not focus exclusively on serving students with the best academic backgrounds and whose resources and circumstances allow them to devote their full attention to college life.

Urban and Metropolitan University Missions

To understand the ways in which urban and metropolitan universities contribute to first-year student success first requires that we take stock of the core mission and objectives of such institutions. The annals of *Metropolitan Universities* include a variety of articles on the substance and nature of this matter. Beginning with the very first issue, the identification of a university as “metropolitan” or “urban” has been characterized as a mission orientation rather than just on geographical location (e.g., Hathaway, Mulhollan, and White 1990).

Although urban and metropolitan universities are as diverse in character as their student bodies, the Portrait of Universities with Metropolitan Alliances (PUMA) project, co-sponsored by the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities and the Urban 13 University Consortium produced a characterization of the mission orientation as including four general elements. These elements are summarized in Table 1, extracted from the project Web site, <http://www.imir.iupui.edu/puma>. The third column of Table 1 suggests how these mission elements might be translated into questions regarding the success of the first-year experience. The next section of this chapter considers in further detail how these elements take shape and form in the urban or metropolitan university. This is followed by a description of one urban university’s efforts to develop first-year student success programs, and the essential role of program evaluation and assessment in promoting urban student success.

Table 1. The Mission Characteristics of Urban and Metropolitan Universities.

Mission Element	Description	Relevance to first-year student success
Access and Support	Providing the residents of their regions access to the highest levels of educational advancement...made available to people of all ages.... These universities offer a wide range of support services to accommodate the diverse needs of traditional-aged campus resident students, commuter students with significant work and family obligations, and local business and industry partners.	Does the institution make its programs accessible? Does it attract diverse students and provide appropriate supports? Are students able to make the transition to the academic community within the broader context of their family, community, and employment circumstances?
Student Learning in the Urban Context	The urban setting provides a rich environment for learning that extends beyond the walls of the classroom. Institutions...draw on this environment to provide students with opportunities to learn from practitioners, develop cross-cultural understanding, apply theory to practice, and contribute to the economic, social, and civic well-being of the community, often in off-campus settings and placements. ...[Helping] students learn more deeply, and [increasing] their capacity to perform their roles as family members, citizens, leaders, and professionals.	How does the first-year college experience incorporate the rich learning resources of the metropolitan area? How is student learning enhanced by connections to the city?
Diversity and Pluralism	“Diversity” may refer to diversity of ethnicity, race, age, socioeconomic background, work experience, educational aspirations or background, the presence of large numbers of transfer, working, part-time, and first-generation students, or a combination of some of these factors. Whatever the particular characteristics of diversity..., urban public universities are committed to sustaining environments that reflect the diversity of their cities and to providing educational experiences that enhance students’ cross-cultural understanding.	Do students recognize the value of diversity and pluralism in their overall learning experience? Do their experiences in college engage them with more diverse people and ideas than their previous experiences?
Civic Engagement	Through collaborations and partnerships with area businesses and community agencies, the faculty, students, and staff at public urban universities contribute to the economic, social, cultural, and technological development of their urban regions.... Urban universities bring their intellectual resources and expertise to bear on urban problems, thus improving quality of life in the city.	Do students bring their learning back to the community? Do they become more active citizens? Do they partake in a greater range of social and cultural activities?

Re-Visioning Success: Civic Engagement and Student Involvement

Involvement in their communities is an integral part of the heritage of urban and metropolitan universities. They were founded, for the most part, to serve the educational needs of the many residents who did not want or were not able to attend a more traditional residential college. These institutions have long met the needs of a diverse array of learners, ranging from the returning GIs of World War II, to large immigrant populations, and more generally to those who did not want to completely disrupt their community lives while pursuing college-level studies.

The richness of the learning environment for urban and metropolitan universities has long been recognized but only recently have a large number of institutions begun to embrace the possibilities in a more systematic and intentional way. The art student sketching the diverse faces on buses and trains, the science student working at an internship in a major chemical company, the social work student volunteering hours at a local clinic are all examples of the many kinds of enriching ways that the region contributes to the students' education and the student to the quality of life in the region. Although these opportunities are all available to students in a range of college settings, urban and metropolitan universities are marked by their prevalence and accessibility. With the increasing popularity of service-learning and community-based programs like America Reads, and with the increasing dependence of social and cultural agencies on volunteers, urban and metropolitan universities have more opportunities than ever to engage with their communities in the educational development of students.

But how do urban and metropolitan universities support the simultaneous engagement of students in college and in their communities? How can they help students gain from the richness of this environment while minimizing the distractions that outside work and family obligations often engender? Part of the answer may lie in the way in which the institution becomes engaged with its community.

For example, urban and metropolitan universities, drawing the majority of their students from their geographic areas, have a unique opportunity to develop K–16 approaches to education. Since students may well come from a more restricted set of high schools as beginning students, campuses are able to concentrate their recruiting efforts on a smaller set of schools. Since those schools are geographically close, faculty and staff can establish close relationships with teachers and counselors. Through these relationships, school teachers and college faculty can gain a better understanding of each other's students and curricula. Adjustments can be made at each end to ensure a more successful transition between high school and college-level subjects.

Another example of the benefits of engagement is the way in which the university's resources are used by the community for social, cultural, and educational events outside of the college curricula. As prospective students and their parents partake in such events at an urban or metropolitan campus, they become more comfortable with the physical setting as well as the people who work and study there. Students' first-year success is greatly enhanced if they already know how to get around the campus and, especially, if they've had previous interactions with faculty and staff. For less economically advantaged students, prior visits to the campus, or visits to their schools by college students with backgrounds similar to theirs may be the catalyst for their future success.

Urban contexts, because of geography and population size, give institutions of higher education places to bring together teachers and faculty, parents and alumni, mentors who are college students with younger students, and other partners to strengthen interest in and preparation for higher education. Such collaborations are consistent with the missions of all concerned; finding means to focus on such partnerships is a key priority for the urban university.

Developing Campus Programs and Structures to Support Student Success

The urban or metropolitan setting provides a context and focus for student success initiatives. The discussion above suggests how such institutions must approach first-year success initiatives with civic engagement and K–16 partnerships, along with family, community, and employment circumstances of students. With this approach and guiding vision in mind, the urban locale can provide assets that can be leveraged to advance student academic achievement. Rather than viewing myopically the metropolitan university as a “distracting” environment comprised of an array of obstacles to overcome, we propose that these environments can be intentionally designed to create enriching, collaborative learning opportunities. The second part of the equation for developing successful programs is the structures and processes for planning, implementing, evaluating, and improving student success programs.

According to Peter Ewell (1997), two general factors have limited the success of programs designed to improve collegiate learning. The first factor is the lack of understanding of what collegiate learning precisely entails and therefore, what strategies are likely to promote it. The second factor is the piecemeal implementation methods generally employed. Ewell provides six insights regarding the requirements for institutional change:

- Change requires a fundamental shift of perspective...
- Change must be systemic...

- Change requires people to relearn their own roles...
- Change requires conscious and consistent leadership...
- Change requires systematic ways to measure progress and guide improvement...
- Change requires a visible “triggering” opportunity... (p. 6)

Following the advice of Ewell and others, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) has attempted to restructure the institution to support undergraduate learning within the urban context. The most salient example of that restructuring effort has been the establishment of a faculty-governed academic unit—University College—that focuses on the undergraduate learning experience starting from a campus-wide and moving toward a community-wide perspective. In the last five years, University College has been a partner with all academic and service units on campus and with key community partners in the regional K–12, non-profit, and for-profit sectors, in creating a more welcoming and supportive learning environment for all students. A number of learning initiatives have resulted from those partnerships. In the process, IUPUI has developed strategies to help ensure the success of those efforts including carefully analyzing the student, campus, and community needs before beginning new initiatives (needs assessment), effectively managing the implementations of new programs (process assessment), and identifying and adapting best practices (outcomes assessment). The results of these assessment efforts are widely distributed and discussed in order to create a feedback loop to ensure ongoing program improvement. The following discussion outlines some of the concrete steps IUPUI has taken in fleshing out the strategies.

Analyzing the Student, Campus, and Community Needs before Beginning New Initiatives

One of the most successful strategies used at IUPUI in the process of establishing new programs to support student learning has been to utilize the efforts of a “disappearing task force.” Faculty, staff, students, and community partners are sometimes hesitant about joining campus committees since membership often feels like a life sentence, the work never ending and rarely acknowledged. Membership on such committees, therefore, is often delegated to junior staff and faculty members who cannot speak for their units and may lack the requisite knowledge of institutional history needed to support effective change. Students and community partners may show up for one or two meetings, but often cannot keep up the commitment given their schedules and priorities.

A disappearing task force structure, on the other hand, may attract faculty, staff, students, and community members who are not only interested in instituting substantial change on the campus in a timely fashion, but are otherwise unavailable for campus-level committee work because of their demanding schedules. These busy individuals are also typically those who are the most influential in their home units and in the community. Capturing their support and interest is critical to the success of new learning initiatives.

A disappearing task force, established with a clear and singular mission to be accomplished in a short and specified time period, will attract a cadre of individuals who can effectively initiate change. In creating the task force, careful attention should be given to ensuring appropriate representation from academic and service units and community partners or that a system is established to quickly disseminate information and gather feedback from all appropriate stakeholders on the campus and in the community.

Once the task force is established to plan a new learning initiative, the committee members should employ the following needs-assessment strategies:

- Read and discuss the current literature in the field.
- Take teams to other campuses with established, successful programs.
- Bring national experts to the campus to meet with faculty, campus, and appropriate community leaders.
- Review relevant institutional and environmental data on student and community demographics and enrollment trends.
- Determine the target groups for the initiative—under-prepared students, transfers, undecided majors, honor students, etc.
- Analyze existing policies for the targeted groups—required orientation, core curriculum, registration processes.
- Determine new resources, policies, and campus practices that will need to be changed, modified, or implemented.
- Consider the limitations on the campus that may impede the successful initiation of the new program but are unlikely to change, and plan accordingly—classroom size, faculty salaries.
- Secure funding to support the initiative.

- Recommend the most appropriate campus unit for housing and overseeing the implementation of the initiative.
- Ensure the support of campus leadership.
- Develop clear and measurable goals for the initiative.
- Suggest a reasonable structure for implementation.

Managing the Implementation Stages

Once the disappearing task force has completed the plans for developing the new learning initiative, the work of that committee is completed, and the management structure takes over the implementation process. At this stage, it is critical to secure the participation of members of the campus and broader community who are committed to the ideas behind the initiative, and who have the energy and skills necessary to ensure the success of the implementation stage. The individuals who implement the work of the disappearing task force do not have to be particularly influential on campus or in their community settings. They are often middle-level faculty, campus staff, and staff from community agencies organizations with high energy and lots of creative ideas. Typically, they also have a strong rapport with students and a clear understanding of their needs.

Two guiding principles for the implementation stage should be to begin with small pilots and to grow the program slowly. If possible, provide incentive dollars to entice the participation of influential faculty and community members in some aspects of the pilots. Other small incentives should be utilized to ensure the ongoing enthusiasm of the implementation groups. Providing pizza lunches, clerical support, and office supplies are relatively inexpensive ways to support those who are piloting the efforts. Finally, the process of implementing the new project should be carefully assessed through quantitative—number of participants, costs, etc.—and through qualitative measures—typically focus group analyses of students, faculty, staff, and community participants. The assessment results should be used to improve the program.

At IUPUI process assessments of the learning community and critical inquiry courses have been used to guide the development and refinement of course templates, which provide listings of the goals and objectives of the courses, as well as examples of effective pedagogies for those initiatives. Process analyses have also contributed to policy changes affecting participants in those programs.

Identifying and Adapting Best Practices

A critical stage in the life of any new initiative is institutionalization. Otherwise the new program remains an isolated, low impact effort, with little campus support. Such a program is vulnerable to budget cutbacks and faculty scorn. Ensuring influential faculty buy-in in the planning stages, well-conceived modification efforts based on process assessment in the pilot stages, and widely distributed outcomes results of the program effectiveness will help in the institutionalization process of new learning initiatives. Outcomes assessment is in particular key to that effort. The following are recommended strategies:

- Employ the campus institutional research office, assessment office, or other third party evaluation team to aid in the assessment of the initiative. Internal assessments are suspect.
- Use both quantitative—GPAs, retention rates, etc.—and qualitative assessment methods. The quantitative assessments results will secure the attention of the campus leadership and possible funding agencies, but it is the qualitative research data that will ensure that the faculty and staff understand the importance of the initiative and its impact on individual students and faculty members.
- Distribute assessment results widely.
- Present the results of the initiative at national conferences and publish the story widely.
- Do a self-study of the program and invite external reviews once the program is established and institutionalized.
- Sponsor campus and community gatherings to highlight the program achievements.

Assessing for Improvement Embedding Activities within a Culture of Evidence

Assessing programs designed to enhance diverse urban students' educational outcomes requires careful conceptualization of the processes and relationships involved before choosing measures and evaluation designs. Assessment scholars have advocated for the development of plans with clear purposes closely aligned with valued program goals (e.g., Banta 2002; Siegel 2003; Swing 2001). Banta contends that periodic assessment conducted primarily to satisfy the requirements of external funding agencies or new campus priorities are not likely to make meaningful impacts unless assessment becomes associated with goals and ongoing processes that are valued by program

administrators and faculty. Thus, although assessment is often initiated to satisfy “external” demands, it is critical that assessment findings are actively used by unit directors and faculty to make ongoing program improvements. Simpson (2002) recommends that a variety of qualitative and quantitative instruments should be employed to facilitate understanding regarding “why” programs and interventions produce specific outcomes. With this in mind, an underlying program theory provides the foundation for outcomes assessment and serves to lend insight into exactly what program components need to be changed to achieve desired outcomes.

At IUPUI assessment is an integral part of the strategy when planning and implementing academic programs and courses. Effectively embedding activities in a “culture of evidence” necessitates a process in which programs are planned, implemented, monitored, and improved based on collaborative assessment initiatives and evaluation findings. At the most basic level, this process necessitates the following: programs and services designed to meet the needs of a diverse set of learners have intentional assessable outcomes, instrumentation is designed to assess these outcomes, mechanisms are established for on-going data collection and program monitoring, and effective strategies are designed to provide feedback on program effectiveness.

Assessing Needs, Processes, and Outcomes to Support Re-Visioning and Implementation

According to Nadler and Shaw (1995), the institutions that will thrive in the next decades will be those that continually enhance their capability to learn and to respond quickly to changing environmental conditions. On the basis of a strategic planning process recently undertaken with participants from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), Schneider and Shoenberg (2001) contend that higher education is in an era of transformative change. These authors report that college and university leaders are committed to making fundamental changes in an effort to improve teaching and learning. Moreover, external demands and pressures are creating a situation in which institutions must implement critical changes to remain competitive and effective providers of educational services.

Meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student body at some institutions might necessitate the implementation of a fundamental, frame-breaking, *discontinuous* planned change effort. According to Nadler and Tushman, discontinuous change involves a “complete break with the past and a major reconstruction of almost every element of the organization” (Nadler and Tushman 1995, p. 22). This type of change almost always involves substantial modifications in strategies and vision. In other cases, a more incremental or gradual change process may be the most appropriate approach. In contrast to discontinuous change, incremental change efforts are primarily focused on changes in existing processes and programs in an effort to solve problems

or improve institutional effectiveness. Incremental change is also less rapid than discontinuous change and typically builds on existing work and improves processes in relatively small steps.

In order to fully realize our “re-visioning” to meet the needs and ensure the success of a diverse community of urban learners, IUPUI has used results from assessment and program evaluation initiatives to inform policy decisions and make incremental program improvements. However, depending on assessment results and the extent to which the needs of our urban students have changed, we have also found it necessary to implement more radical changes in university structures, curriculum, and policies (e.g., the development of University College). In re-visioning for student success we have found that establishing a comprehensive assessment plan is critical in ensuring that programs meet the diverse needs of commuter students, are implemented as conceptualized, and are effectively achieving intended goals. In other words, we have implemented strategies, structures, and research designs to determine if programs and services are effectively promoting civically engaged learners, if students are perceiving that programs are enhancing their quality of life, and if the urban environment is functioning as a learning resource. Through ongoing internal evaluations, program directors may identify an unmet need, implement a program to better meet the need, monitor the program implementation, and conduct an outcome assessment once a program component/service is in operation.

The Action Research Paradigm— Thinking, Doing, Evaluating, Reflecting, and Improving...Together

Effectively re-visioning for student success requires a dynamic, collaborative, iterative process in which program evaluation results stimulate dialogue, interaction, and ultimately data-driven, ongoing change. At IUPUI we have found that a participatory action-research approach to program assessment is an effective approach for gaining progress toward the vision for student success and for making ongoing program improvements. The action research model ensures that key stakeholders (e.g., students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community partners) are active participants in the research and thus research becomes a collaborative process. With this approach a research question is posed (e.g., is a specified program meeting the needs of commuter students?) through an active discussion among stakeholders and researchers. Data collection involves both researchers and stakeholders, as does data analysis and especially the interpretation. Results are reviewed as part of a stakeholder action-planning activity. The interventions are implemented and data is collected again to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions. The action research model is thus a cyclical process of diagnosis, change, and evaluation.

At IUPUI we feel that we have made noteworthy strides toward achieving our vision for urban student success by implementing strategies (e.g., action research, faculty involvement, managing implementations) to ensure that assessment results are widely communicated and used to determine progress toward achieving our vision.

Conclusions

This analysis of our experience suggests three essential elements for promoting first-year student success at urban and metropolitan universities:

1. Define success in terms related to the population that you serve and the context within which you serve them. For urban and metropolitan universities this should include the engagement of the university in the community and the full life of the student within and outside the institution.
2. Engage as broad a spectrum of the campus as possible, through permanent structures and dynamic processes, in a systematic effort to improve the undergraduate learning experience for the first year and beyond.
3. Employ participative, action-oriented assessment strategies to engage a variety of stakeholders into evidence-based reflection on the effectiveness of various strategies in light of the overall goals for undergraduate learning and for the entire institution.

There are many pressures for urban and metropolitan institutions to succumb to a vision of success that is born and bred at institutions that serve different populations under different circumstances. Rather than lamenting these conditions as limitations, urban and metropolitan universities should embrace their purposes and advantages, thereby better serving their students and their communities.

This does not mean that an urban or metropolitan university cannot look to other kinds of colleges and universities for examples of programs and processes that might be adaptable to local needs. Nor does it suggest that the kind of student engagement possible at traditional residential institutions is not a positive experience for students who choose that pathway through higher education. In fact, many urban universities offer a traditional, residential option for a portion of their students.

What we are suggesting is that faculty and staff at urban and metropolitan universities not be overly swayed by the limited picture of success that is painted in the literature on student learning. By adapting a more mission-appropriate vision of first-year student success, and by developing participative, systematic, and evidence-based processes for program development, implementation, and improvement, faculty, staff, students, and community partners can engage together in a learning community in the largest sense.

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