

Building Collaborative Strategies Symposium

Synopsis

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Introduction



Reporting the results of small-group discussions are John Gritts, American Indian College Fund; Fred Stennis, Oakwood College; Dyann Moses, Alcorn State University; Tommy Sims, DeVry University.

On Feb. 18, 2003, 130 representatives from 56 minority-serving postsecondary institutions located throughout the United States and Puerto Rico met to explore common issues related to outreach programs, student retention and student-loan debt management. These issues are vital to all postsecondary institutions, but have special importance to minority-serving institutions because of the unique challenges that they face and the student populations that they serve.

Participants in the Building Collaborative Strategies Symposium included college and university presidents, chief academic officers, chief student-affairs officers, financial-aid directors, admissions and student-retention coordinators and outreach-program directors. Of the 56 institutions represented at the symposium, 27 were Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), 20 were Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and nine were Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities.

Sponsored by USA Funds®, the nation's leading student-loan guarantor, the symposium was designed to generate ideas, explore practices and discover ways in which minority-serving institutions can assist each other in addressing these three critical areas of importance. The symposium also built on a similar gathering of minority-serving college administrators hosted by USA Funds Feb. 20-22, 2002, in Atlanta. Attendance for the 2003 symposium was double the participation for the 2002 event.

Kicking off the two-day symposium were presentations from leaders of each of the three types of minority-serving institutions represented at the event. Talbert Shaw, president of Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C., spoke on behalf of Historically Black Colleges and Universities; David Yarlott, president of Little Big Horn College in Crow Agency, Mont., spoke on behalf of tribal colleges; and Antonio Flores, president of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), spoke on behalf of Hispanic-Serving Institutions.

The three explored the topic, "The Role of Minority-Serving Institutions in Providing Access to Minority Students." Collectively, the three opening speakers eloquently laid the foundation for the Building Collaborative Strategies Symposium.

The format for the symposium included three topical sessions focusing on access, retention and debt management. Each session included an initial presentation from experts on each topic, followed by small-group discussions of the topic. The results of these small-group discussions then were reported back to the entire gathering.

Discussion Topics



Paul Thayer, director of undergraduate student retention at Colorado State University, discusses access programs that strengthen student success.

Access Programs That Strengthen Student Success

Paul Thayer, director of undergraduate student retention at Colorado State University, made the initial presentation on access programs that strengthen student success.

Thayer's presentation stressed institutional responsibility for outreach to students in their pre-college years as laying the foundation for future student success. He identified seven factors that go into making strong outreach programs:

- ◇ They must be central to the mission of the institution. They cannot function well if they are housed on the periphery of the institution.
- ◇ They must involve a long-term commitment. Student expectations about college are established early, usually by the sixth grade. Effective outreach programs are involved with students and their families as they are forming those expectations.
- ◇ They must be multi-faceted, engaging the minds and hearts of students. They must strengthen skill development across the academic spectrum as well as be inspirational.
- ◇ They must communicate a vision of the community, describing how education serves the community and employing strategies that are culturally relevant.
- ◇ They must expect the best of students by approaching students on the basis of their assets and strengths and expecting from students their highest-possible performance.
- ◇ They must establish a bridge to institutional processes by linking students to financial aid, student support, advising, registration, cultural centers and faculty.
- ◇ Institutions must constantly assess the effectiveness of the program.

Thayer's presentation was followed by a panel discussion that included René Dubay, director of the TRIO Talent Search and GEAR UP programs for the Montana State University system, and three representatives of Florida International University: Kandell Bentley-Baker, director of retention; Dorrett Sawyers, director of student-support services and multicultural programs and services; and Jeannette Cruz, assistant director of student-support services.

Dubay spoke of the importance of the inspirational aspect of outreach programs, especially those designed for first-generation, low-income students. She noted that preparation alone is not enough to support student access and retention. Instead, Dubay reported, programs should be designed to touch the hearts of students by helping them and their families understand that college can be a real possibility for them.



Jeannette Cruz, Dorrett Sawyers and Kandell Bentley-Baker explain the student-support services that have helped Florida International University significantly increase its first-year retention rate.

Bentley-Baker reported that Florida International University has raised its first-year retention rate to 83.5 percent from 77 percent over four years. Approximately 80 percent of the commuter school's 32,000 students are minority students, and more than half are employed. Bentley-Baker noted that responsibility for retention efforts is integrated throughout the university, rather than in a single office. She described residence-hall peer-mentoring programs, faculty-freshmen interest groups, first-year experiences classes, online learning centers and a live math-tutoring program that is available online until midnight each night.

Sawyers and Cruz described a successful student-support services program that serves 169 primarily low-income, minority and first-generation college students. More than 92 percent of the students in the program are making good academic progress, and 71 percent of seniors in the program graduate.

Cruz reported that the program involves intensive contact with freshmen during their first eight weeks of classes. The program is bolstered by strong contacts with the financial-aid office, and counseling and career-services staff, and by supportive faculty.

The small-group discussion that followed these presentations generated several additional ideas for access programs that promote student success. Participants discussed the value of mentorship programs using faculty, retired faculty and staff and graduates of the college as mentors.

The use of orientation programs was another topic. Participants cited challenges in getting students to participate and in providing effective orientation programs in light of financial constraints.

Many of the discussion group members cited the use of TRIO programs, not only to ensure access but also to strengthen student retention. Other often-cited topics were the importance of informed and prepared students and involved parents. Discussion-group members also emphasized the importance of campus staff's partnering with high-school counselors, pre-college programs, school superintendents, corporate advisory boards and others in the community. Some participants reported on the success of campus "open-house" programs under which local high-school students are invited to campus for the day and provided information about admissions, academics and financial aid.

Best Practices in Student Retention

Lana Low, senior executive, Noel-Levitz, provided an overview of best practices in student retention. Low's presentation was supported by her years of work in the retention field, as well as by the results of a recent student-retention initiative supported by USA Funds. That initiative included assessments of student-satisfaction levels, campus workshops and a soon-to-be-published handbook of best practices in student retention.

Low reported that a predictive model that Noel-Levitz developed for USA Funds identified student attrition as the best indicator of future loan defaults. Because student retention is an index of the quality of student life and learning on campus, Low reported that "schools with higher satisfaction levels really enjoy lower loan-default rates, higher alumni giving, greater satisfaction and greater graduation rates."

Low noted that demographic, socioeconomic, financial and academic issues are among the risk factors for student attrition. According to Low, one of the key academic variables that predict which students are at risk of leaving school early is the difference in the predicted grade-point average (GPA) for the student and the student's actual GPA during the first year in school.

Low identified the following four pieces to what she called the "student-retention puzzle."

Institutional Assessment. This assessment determines "who the institution is" by examining factors including first-year retention rates, performance gaps between student expectations and satisfaction levels, graduation rates, placement rates, alumni giving and student-loan default rates.

Student Assessments. Low described three criteria to assess an institution's students: the entering variables, such as academic history, the geographic and demographic variables and test scores; motivation variables, which explain why students attend a particular institution; and integration variables, which describe what happens to students once they are on campus.

Institutional Intervention. This piece of the student-retention puzzle reflects institutional activities, including retention committees, student-success goals, student tracking, student-feedback plans, adviser training, quality-service training, faculty/staff awards and campus celebrations.

Student Intervention. This category includes items such as intensive advising for freshmen, extended orientation, individual student-success plans, mentoring for all students and financial guidance.

Low reported that the key concept of student retention is reflected in the following equation: Student Entrance + Student Involvement + Student Integration = Persistence. Institutions that are most successful in improving student retention put students first and provide them with the tools they need to survive, Low reported.

Low's presentation was followed by a panel featuring Mari Chapa, director of financial aid, and Alma Garcia, GEAR UP director, both of Texas Southmost College/The University of Texas at Brownsville, and John Anderson, vice president of academic affairs at Oakwood College in Huntsville, Ala.

Chapa described several initiatives undertaken by Texas Southmost College/The University of Texas at Brownsville to improve student retention. These initiatives include a Learning Assessment Center, supplemental instruction, special training for faculty members who interact with high-risk students and an early-alert system for at-risk students. Chapa related that, during financial-aid awareness days, the college brings 2,000 high-school seniors from the Rio Grande Valley to campus for sessions about housing, athletics, academic programs and enrollment services. Chapa reported that the institution also sends representatives to high schools to help students and parents complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and discuss admissions issues.

To sharpen the institution's retention efforts, Chapa reported that the school has shifted enrollment services to the academic-affairs department from the student-services department and required all departments to develop retention plans and strategies.

Garcia described the important role of GEAR UP in establishing partnerships that are having a positive impact on the institution's retention efforts. Starting with early awareness among seventh-grade students, Garcia reported, GEAR UP and other outreach programs help provide secondary-school administrators and teachers with a "clear map" of what it takes to prepare a student for college. She discussed the importance of school-reform efforts, such as encouraging local school superintendents to ensure that all students are enrolled in Algebra I by eighth grade and to strengthen teacher-training efforts.

Anderson discussed efforts by Oakwood College to make student retention a strategic initiative at the institution. He framed his presentation around three questions: What does it take to make retention a strategic initiative at your institution? What does it take to get everybody on board? What does it take to keep it moving?

Anderson noted that a stimulus usually is required to prompt an institution to focus on retention. In Oakwood's case, that stimulus came through the results of a student-satisfaction survey, which identified the gap between the institution's perception of the degree of student satisfaction and the students' actual satisfaction levels. The survey focused the institution's energy on closing that gap. As a result, Anderson reported, the college established an institution-wide retention committee with the institutional strength necessary to get something done. He stressed the importance of connecting the retention initiative to the institution's budget and considering funding for student retention as an investment. Anderson also advised campus administrators to set clear objectives and targets for their retention programs and to establish an assessment system.

As a result of its process, Oakwood's retention efforts are much more focused and effective than they had been previously.

Several best practices in student retention were discussed in the subsequent small-group sessions. Some campuses provide an "academic alert" whereby faculty members notify counseling staff when students start missing classes or struggle with tests. Counselors then can address these issues before students fall farther behind academically. Several participants recommended organizational changes, such as shifting counseling and tutoring from student services to the academic side of the institution to encourage more faculty involvement. Others noted the importance of centralizing the retention function within the institution.



Small groups brainstormed ideas for enhancing student success, student retention and student-loan default prevention.

Some participants referenced programs that permit high-school students or college freshmen to “try out” college by taking three to nine credits during the summer or early fall. Another school representative told of profiling students based on admissions-test scores, GPAs and other indicators and providing additional attention to students with lower scores.

The small groups also discussed the special retention challenges faced by institutions that have open-enrollment policies. To deal with those challenges, participants recommended identifying early those students who are struggling academically or with absences, and assisting them with counseling and tutoring. One school requires students with academic problems to sign a contract agreeing to meet with advisers and tutors and take other steps to enhance their academic standing.

Several participants noted that the level of customer service to students is a critical factor in successful retention. Others cited faculty participation and the quality of academic advising as additional keys to retention success. The small-group participants suggested expanding retention committees to include, in addition to faculty, administrators and other campus staff, community leaders, school superintendents and other education officials. They also discussed faculty and staff incentives for assisting with retention measures and the importance of including money-management and debt-management instruction in orientation or student-success classes.

Best Practices in Default Management

The panel on best practices in default management included Jackie Hendrickson, student-loan officer at Salish Kootenai College in Pablo, Mont.; Roel Villarreal, director of student financial aid at Texas A&M University-Kingsville; Frank Ureno, associate vice president for enrollment management at Texas A&M University-Kingsville; and Yvonne Mitchell, student-loan collections manager, North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, N.C.

Members of the panel described their institutions’ efforts to prevent loan defaults.

At Texas A&M University-Kingsville, a Hispanic-Serving Institution of 6,500 students, school officials began their investigation of loan defaults by examining the student population to learn that freshmen and sophomores had higher default rates than upperclassmen and graduate students. The school also compared its cohort rate to the rates for neighboring institutions and similar institutions.

Villarreal reported that, because institutional resources did not permit hiring a dedicated default-prevention staff person, the school decided to develop a default-management plan and its own default-management team on campus. The initial task was to educate the rest of the university community about the importance of the student-loan default rate and its impact on the student body, the administration and the college itself.

Villarreal noted that campus staff took several steps as part of the default-management initiative. They established partnerships with the institution's top-10 education lenders. They revised their financial-aid packaging philosophy by not offering loans to freshmen students unless the students request them. They created several scholarships, including transfer scholarships and persistence scholarships. They instituted academic counseling, evaluation and tutoring requirements for students who received waivers from requirements for satisfactory academic progress. They also changed the student-withdrawal process to include an exit interview with counseling staff, both to better understand why students leave the institution and also to "salvage" some of the students from withdrawal from the institution.

Ureno's presence on the dean's council enables him to keep faculty leaders informed of changes in financial aid or other issues. Ureno also reported that it is critical to make sure that academic advisers can accurately advise students of the financial-aid implications of dropping a class or withdrawing from the institution.

With enrollment of between 950 and 1,000 students, Salish Kootenai is the only tribal college that participates in the federal student-loan program. The college implemented its default-management program following the 1998 cohort year, after it had recorded cohort rates in excess of 25 percent for two of the previous three years.

Hendrickson reported that Salish Kootenai requires all borrowers to receive entrance and exit counseling every year. Hendrickson collects six references from each borrower and works closely with the school's retention office to track student attendance. She noted that students are required to attend school at least 30 days before they receive their first check.

Hendrickson also tracks students after they leave if they become delinquent in their loan payments. She even makes home visits to borrowers. In addition, the school has an arrangement with its guarantor to rapidly process deferment requests for delinquent borrowers. She reported that, because of the scarcity of jobs on the reservation, many former students qualify for economic-hardship deferment.

As a result of these default-management efforts, Salish Kootenai's cohort rate for 2000 dropped to 11 percent.

At North Carolina A&T State University, an HBCU with an enrollment of approximately 9,000 students, Mitchell and her staff work with lists of former students who are entering repayment on their loans to identify those who have withdrawn from school, transferred to other institutions, or simply left without officially withdrawing. Mitchell reported that her office employs intensive telephone and letter-writing campaigns to reach borrowers who have fallen behind in their payments and are in danger of default. As part of the effort to contact borrowers, the staff works at least one weekday evening each week and on some Saturdays.

She reported that exit counseling is emphasized and that students cannot obtain transcripts or register for graduate studies if they have not completed the required counseling.



During the small-group discussions that followed the presentations, many participants cited the importance of contact with students while they are on campus and following graduation. They recommended reminder letters and notifications during each borrower's grace period.

The participants noted the importance of lender and guarantor support for their borrower-counseling activities. Several reported successfully using financial-literacy programs, such as Life SkillsSM, in freshmen orientations, entrance interviews and other programs.

One college emphasizes the importance of debt management by hosting a "Loan Debt Fair," assisted by education lenders, to discuss with students debt-management strategies.

The discussion groups also focused on the value of an institutional debt-management plan. Participants noted that many campuses lack such a plan.

Many participants reported that their institutions have adjusted aid-packaging practices to help minimize student debt. Some reported that they no longer package loans upfront to first-year students, although they will certify loans for eligible students based on a student's request. Others reported that they require independent students to demonstrate a need for the unsubsidized portion of their loans.

Participants also cited the value of using work-study students, graduate students and retired faculty in debt-management and loan-counseling activities, both to meet resource constraints and, in the case of students, to enhance the message by having peers deliver it to fellow students.

Other Presentations



Deputy Assistant Secretary Wilbert Bryant Jr. describes efforts by the U.S. Department of Education to further strengthen minority-serving institutions.

In addition to the three main topics explored at the symposium, the participants heard three additional presentations.

Wilbert Bryant Jr., deputy assistant secretary for higher-education programs at the U.S. Department of Education, discussed the department's "No Child Left Behind" initiative for educational improvement in kindergarten through 12th grade, as well as the need for strengthened institutional accountability. He also spoke of the need for greater persistence and college-completion rates. Additionally, Bryant cited the department's efforts to provide increased assistance to further strengthen minority-serving higher-education institutions.

Jamie Merisotis, president of the Institute for Higher Education Policy, discussed the reauthorization recommendations of the Alliance for Equity in Higher Education. The Alliance is a coalition of organizations representing minority-serving institutions, including the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO), the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) and the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC). Among the alliance's reauthorization recommendations are the following:

- ◇ Doubling the maximum Pell grant over the next six years and making it an entitlement.
- ◇ Restoring eligibility for federal student aid to prisoners and those with drug convictions.
- ◇ Expanding provisions for student-loan forgiveness to promote greater student participation in disciplines where minorities are underrepresented.
- ◇ Raising student-loan borrowing limits, contingent on expanded loan forgiveness.
- ◇ Establishing new graduate-level opportunities for minority-serving institutions.
- ◇ Providing significant increases in Title III and Title V funding authorizations for institutional aid and development to strengthen minority-serving institutions.

Merisotis conceded that the recommendations are ambitious, but he also noted that they are important in light of the significant role played by minority-serving institutions in providing educational access for first-generation, low-income and minority students.

Mae Dunn-St. Julien of USA Funds Services provided an overview of USA Funds' debt-management services. She described USA Funds' financial-literacy program, Life Skills, as well as the new Default Management System (DMS)[™]. DMS is a PC-based software that helps postsecondary institutions reduce their cohort default rates by helping them track and communicate with borrowers. St. Julien also described USA Funds' "Best Practices in Student Retention" initiative and the services offered by USA Funds' team of debt-management consultants. In addition, she previewed Unlock the Future[™], USA Funds' new early-awareness program for middle-school students and their families.

Participant Observations



Virtually every symposium participant indicated that the symposium was a worthwhile activity. Most indicated that they previously had little or no opportunity to interact with representatives from other types of institutions, and that the opportunity afforded by the symposium to interact across cultural lines was invaluable. They also appreciated the format and opportunity to share success stories and effective strategies undertaken by other institutions.

The symposium participants recommended several additional topics for future dialogue. These topics included the following items:

- ◇ Use of technology in retention and debt management.
- ◇ Access and retention strategies for nontraditional students.
- ◇ National issues affecting minority-serving institutions.
- ◇ The benefits and drawbacks of student-loan consolidation.
- ◇ Team building for enhanced retention efforts.
- ◇ Educating parents more effectively.
- ◇ Involving faculty more effectively in retention efforts.
- ◇ Influencing the national agenda for reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

Participants expressed a strong desire to continue a dialogue among administrators of minority-serving institutions on these critical issues.

Additional Information



For additional copies of this synopsis, contact Robert Murray, manager of corporate communications, USA Funds, at (317) 806-1283, or by e-mail to bmurray@usafunds.org.

For further information about the Building Collaborative Strategies Symposium or USA Funds' debt-management initiatives, contact Tom Billard, vice president, USA Funds Services, at (866) 497-8723, ext. 1822, or by e-mail to tbillard@usafunds.org.

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