Even with More At-Risk Students, Professional Colleges and Universities Can Achieve Student Success

For open-access, private-sector educational institutions, the biggest opportunities and the biggest challenges have the same origin: the non-traditional student. By serving a non-traditional student population, career and professional colleges and universities have tapped into a long-ignored market with great need and strong potential for growth. But the customer — i.e., the career or professional college student — requires a higher level of service and attention than a traditional higher-education student.

Demographic information compiled by the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities (APSCU) helps explain why this is true:

- These students are predominantly working adults looking to obtain an education directly related to their career goals.
- More than three-quarters are defined as independent or “self-supporting.”
- Sixty-two percent are age 24 or older.
- Nearly half have dependent children.
- More than 39 percent of these students work more than 30 hours a week.
Educational researchers have another term for these demographic statistics: risk factors. A report from the Imagine America Foundation, a research organization focused on the career college sector, put it this way: “In general, the more risk characteristics a student has, the greater the chance that he or she will not complete college. Simply put, it is more challenging for an institution to retain and graduate high-risk students.”

Career colleges have higher percentages of at-risk students than do other sectors of education, according to the Imagine America report. “For example, four-year career colleges have a much higher percentage of students with at least one risk factor (78 percent) versus those at public (24 percent) or private, not-for-profit (21 percent) institutions.

**AT-RISK STUDENTS GRAVITATE TOWARD CAREER COLLEGES**

Percentage of beginning postsecondary students with three or more risk factors, by institutional type/sector, 2003

![Bar chart showing the percentage of students with three or more risk factors for different types of institutions](chart)

Despite these statistics, the Imagine America research uncovered success: Compared with traditional public and private higher-education institutions, career colleges held their own with slightly lower graduation rates at the four-year level, graduation rates that were on par at the less-than-two-year level and — most encouragingly — graduation rates that exceeded traditional institutions at the two-year level.
The next question, which Imagine America researchers raised, but did not answer, is: What do career and professional colleges and universities that successfully graduate at-risk students do to get it right? The answer, according to educational experts and on-the-ground educators, is twofold. First, successful career and professional colleges — whether serving on-campus or online students — outline performance, attendance and participation policies that clearly explain to students exactly what they must do to succeed. Second, these schools leverage tools contained in learning management systems to engage and monitor at-risk students.

Career colleges and professional universities can use the information they already have about students to help identify those who might be at risk. The demographic and past-performance clues are there in learning management system and admissions data; schools simply need to employ the right analytical tools to turn these clues into actionable information.
SET THE STAGE FOR SUCCESS

Student success begins with setting expectations. That’s especially important for institutions that serve a high percentage of at-risk students, says Ronnie Kramer, an online education expert and consultant for Blackboard. At career and professional colleges, she advises, any strategic effort to boost student retention and performance should begin at the administrative level and incorporate a few best practices:

- **Convene an institution-wide task force to determine which student metrics are important to measure.** While it is important to monitor obvious metrics such as attendance and grades, it is necessary for institutions to go further — to consider subtler metrics like student engagement. Establish rules for the engagement level expected by students and faculty. For example, students may be required to add three to five posts a week to a class discussion board, and faculty may be required to communicate one-on-one with students once every two weeks via phone or text — in addition to the feedback they already provide in threaded discussions or the grade book.

- **Make sure someone “owns” student success and retention.** At some schools, that “owner” may be faculty — including adjunct faculty. At other schools, a student adviser may be responsible for checking in with students, especially those identified as at-risk.

- **Determine which technology tools can be used to measure the metrics your school deems critical.** Many of these tools are embedded in learning management systems already in use.

- **Ensure all faculty and student advisers are properly trained to use these measurement tools effectively.**

- **Regularly evaluate the school’s chosen student-success metrics.** Does each metric accurately indicate success? Are the metrics — and underlying expectations — still relevant?

- **Leverage LMS tools to create a system for proactive, personalized communication with students to ensure they understand expectations and receive motivational reminders at key times — such as during holidays.**

This combination of technology and personal touch is what differentiates career and professional colleges from many traditional higher-education institutions, Kramer says. “It’s a competitive advantage for the career and professional colleges that get it right.”

Supporting policy with technology becomes even more important as career and professional colleges map out a future built around online offerings, a trend that has gained significant momentum in just two years. In 2009, 51 percent of private-sector institutions said online learning was a critical part of their long-term strategy; by 2011, 69 percent of private-sector institutions said online offerings were key, according to Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States, a study by Babson College’s Babson Survey Research Group.

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### ONLINE EDUCATION GAINS IMPORTANCE AT PRIVATE-SECTOR COLLEGES

**Online education is critical to the long-term strategy of My Institution by Institutional Control, Percent agreeing — Fall 2009 to Fall 2011**

![Graph showing the percentage of institutions agreeing that online education is critical to their long-term strategy by institutional control from Fall 2009 to Fall 2011](image)

Source: Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States, Babson Survey Research Group, 2011
The immediate benefit of such analytics is that it allows schools to know who is at risk today. Longer term, analytical information can help a school create an environment where students have the best chance for success. For example, by knowing what kinds of characteristics are shared by students who have succeeded in the past, a school can identify which applicants are most likely to do well at its institution. In addition, analytical information can help a school do everything from forecast which classes will need student support counselors on standby to which graduates are most likely to remain involved as alumni.

Engagement Yields Success in the Classroom

Attendance is the foundation of a successful educational experience, Kramer says, but the next layer — engagement — is an even more important determinant of student success. That’s where tools contained within learning management systems can really make a difference in the educational experience, she says.

“Collaborative tools — such as discussion boards, social media, live presentations and shared, student-generated content — are the best ways to connect with students, especially in the online classroom,” Kramer advises.

Faculty training on learning management systems should include creative ways to keep students engaged, she says. For example, assessments can be “gamified” with game show-like quizzes. Such gamification of education is a growing technology trend in skills-based learning environments, according to technology research and consulting firm Burrus Research. Interactive tools can be embedded in the learning management systems that career and professional colleges already use, making it easy to incorporate such engaging game-like experiences into coursework and assessments, Kramer says.

Blackboard AttendancePro offers a variety of ways to track educational attendance and engagement:

- Pre-course surveys
- Assignment completion
- Discussion board participation
- Blog and portfolio completion
- Assessment and Grade Center activity
- Live chat participation
- Faculty interaction with students on all of the above
Learning management systems also can enable students to participate in a shared experience (such as watching a live video feed) to prompt real-time discussions.

A few real-world examples show how schools are using the LMS tools already at their disposal to connect with and engage students:

- **One professional university** lets students see aggregated behavior- and performance-based statistics on the entire student population, allowing them to compare their own performance to that of their peers. For example, a student might see that others in the same course who regularly post to the discussion board have a higher average grade, creating motivation for them to get more involved. The goal is to help students link behavior — high engagement — to the desired outcome — successful academic performance.

- **At a college on the East Coast**, students can use the LMS app on their mobile devices to get alerts on everything from syllabus updates to available parking spaces. The students are engaged 24/7, making them more invested in the course work, more likely to capitalize on resources provided by the institution and, ultimately, more likely to succeed.

- **On another campus**, student services advisers use LMS-enabled instant messaging to give students immediate attention when they have questions, want to schedule tutoring sessions or need information from administrative departments such as admissions or financial aid.

- **One school** has found a creative way to keep at-risk English-as-a-second-language students engaged outside of regular coursework. Instructors use voice-authoring contained within the LMS to email voice messages to students and to receive students’ voice messages in return — a surefire way to keep communication flowing and track the improvement of language skills over time.
LMS Social Media Tools Foster Easy and Valuable Educational Networking

With the explosion of social media, many LMS companies are incorporating social media features into their products to enhance student-engagement functionality. Students have easy-to-use, social tools for building connections and collaborating with their various networks within their daily lives, and they expect that same experience in education. (Students in online-only programs desire an even greater social media connection to those on the other side of the screen.)

LMSs have a unique opportunity to transform social media functionality into tools for educational networking. An LMS already has data on who is attending and teaching each class, providing an easy way for students and faculty to build new academic relationships through the learning environment they already interact with daily.

Social learning functionality within an LMS could enable students and faculty to:

- Identify and build education networks within their own institution and even across institutions worldwide.
- Leverage education networks so users can connect with and learn from one another.
- Maintain an education network throughout their academic career.
- Tap into learning-based relationships and resources that otherwise would not have been as easily accessible.
- Access social learning capabilities within the learning environment, so users aren’t driven to other social media platforms less appropriate to academic networking.

Ultimately, LMS-based social media tools improve student engagement in the learning experience and drive student retention.

Performance Tracking Helps Students and Institutions Stay on Target

An early-warning system for attendance also works for sending up a red flag when coursework is sub-par. Progress-tracking and grading tools ensure instructors and students have a constantly updated understanding of performance. A missed assignment or an unexpectedly low test score can set off a notification that a student is struggling.

Kramer says career and professional colleges must decide — well before a red flag goes up — what will happen next. It’s part of the policy- and expectation-setting process, she notes, and it’s also why faculty or student advisers should understand their “ownership” role in student success — they are the first line of intervention when students begin to struggle.

In addition, tracking performance not only enables intervention, it also helps schools gauge whether student-success policies and metrics are working as planned. Kramer says, “Can you use your measurements to show that learning is taking place? If not, then it’s time to reevaluate the metrics,” she says.

By using analytical and reporting tools contained within learning management systems, career and professional colleges can get a full view of institutional success, Kramer says. What is working? What isn’t? Do policies and expectations need to change?

Conclusion

Open-access, private-sector educational institutions find opportunity and challenges in their non-traditional student populations. Many are at-risk students who require a high level of service and attention. To boost success among these students, career and professional colleges must set clear policies and expectations for students, and leverage learning management system technology tools to foster engagement and improve learning outcomes.