

Northwest Missouri State University: A Case Study in Student Success Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This case study highlights student success transformation efforts at a Midwestern, regional, state university, namely, Northwest Missouri State University (Northwest). Northwest is a pilot cohort member of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) Center for Student Success initiative. Included is the discussion of the importance of student success transformation to meet changing learner needs and positioning the institution to enroll and serve the students of tomorrow. Best practices are highlighted in the case study, including discussion of the Loss/Momentum framework, the importance of engaging the campus community as co-owners of student success, incorporating the voice of the student, and overcoming transformation challenges. The findings offer insights and practices that can be considered for implementation at other higher education institutions.

Keywords: achieving enrollment goals, student retention, student success, transformation efforts, best practices

INTRODUCTION

Northwest Missouri State University (Northwest), a state-assisted, regional, moderately selective four-year institution (Northwest, n.d.), faces a number of challenges including declining state funding, a shrinking number of high school graduates (McManus, 2020), and increased taxpayer scrutiny as 60% of Americans believe higher education is headed in the wrong direction (Brown, 2018). Alone, each of the challenges could be troublesome, but this complex combination, coupled with the uncertainty of COVID-19, is capable of potential disaster for institutions of higher education across the Nation. Higher education continues to operate under the microscope as the general public, or more specifically, the US taxpayer, exhibits decreasing levels of tolerance to what it considers to be unacceptably high failure rates (Field, 2018). Additionally, Standard & Poor's gave higher education a negative outlook for 2020 due to the sensitivity of tuition, decline in the number of international students and high school graduates, and the recent level of state funding (Busta, 2020).

Northwest is uniquely positioned in a rural community and is, in fact, closer to three surrounding states than its own state capital. With a state population of just over six million (US Census Bureau, 2019), Northwest is one of more than 10 public, four-year higher education institutions in Missouri. Despite its rural location, enrollment reached over 7,000 students in 2019. Of the total enrollment, 80% are undergraduate students. In-state students account for 60% of enrollment with international students accounting for six percent and out-of-state students accounting for 34%. Domestic students of color make up 12% of the total enrollment. The number of first-generation students enrolled at Northwest has increased from 28% to 35% in the last five years, with 50% growth of first-generation students in the freshman cohort from 2014 to 2019 (Northwest, 2019). Despite the current challenges faced by higher education institutions, Table 1 (Appendix) shows that Northwest was the only institution in the State of Missouri to see positive changes in one-year, three-year, and five-year enrollment percentages (State Department of Higher Education, 2019) while also achieving record retention rates.

This case study will describe the inputs that resulted in these seemingly positive results and, will share best-practice recommendations that might be applied to other institutions of higher learning.

BACKGROUND

Northwest was founded in the early 1900s as a normal school to provide teacher education for the region (Northwest, n.d.). It has remained true to its roots and is still today a regional and state leader in preparing future educators. Over the last 115 years, the institution has undergone three name changes, the last being the change to Northwest Missouri State University in the early 1970s. Northwest has seen periods of enrollment growth as well as periods of significant enrollment decline. In 1987, Northwest earned the title of the nation's first Electronic Campus, installing a computer terminal in each residence hall room and faculty office (Hubbard & Rickman, 1991). In 1997, Northwest provided each faculty member with a personal notebook computer to facilitate work from both at home and in the office. The top three programs by enrollment size include education, agriculture, and business. Not only do students attend for its academic programs, Northwest is also known for its athletic programs, specifically football and men's basketball, winning five national championships in the last 10 years. In its over 100-year existence, Northwest is currently under the leadership of its 10th president, Dr. John Jasinski.

Jasinski's background is "grounded in using systems-based models for organizational improvement" which has guided transformation efforts at the institution (Ingram's, 2019).

DESCRIPTION

As the 2019 American Association of State Colleges & Universities (AASCU) *Excellence and Innovation Award* recipient for Student Success and College Completion (AASCU, 2019), Northwest must not rest on its recent laurels and instead build on its transformative success to focus on increasing enrollment, retention, and persistence of students leading to timely degree completion. While the number of underrepresented and Pell-eligible students enrolled is increasing, Northwest data indicates that these student segments do not necessarily retain and complete at the same rate as the majority student segment that are not Pell-eligible (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Should the trend of increased enrollment of underrepresented students, first-generation students, and Pell-eligible students continue, coupled with the equity gaps in retention and completion, it could prove problematic financially and politically for Northwest. Missouri higher education institutions are placing increased emphasis on the performance of traditionally underserved and underrepresented students. The state's equity report specifies that "more must be done to improve progress and retention rates among all students, especially those who are traditionally underserved or underrepresented, to ensure equitable and higher completion rates and better opportunities for the state's students" (State Department of Higher Education, 2019).

To position itself for success, Northwest must continue to transform the institution focusing on improving the student experience to better serve and ensure students with changing learner needs succeed. The ongoing transformation process includes being one of five institutions selected to participate in the AASCU Center for Student Success pilot cohort. This transformation initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Intermediaries for Scale grant, focuses on diverse student groups, including low-income, first-generation, and students of color. The two-year grant is to "accelerate transformation and increasing student success outcomes across AASCU's membership network of nearly 400 public colleges, universities, and systems" (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2020).

PROBLEM

The higher education industry has reached uncharted water in recent years. The combination of decreased birth rates, the relative strength of the US economy, and questions swirling on the value of a college degree spells trouble for the higher education industry. Looking at the industry as a whole, the number of students enrolled has declined over 10% the last seven years, the number of institutions awarding federal financial aid is down over five percent, and the total number of college and universities is at its lowest number since 1998 (Lederman, 2019).

While the number of students enrolling at higher education institutions is declining overall, the diversity of the student body at institutions is increasing. For example, Bohanon (2019) suggests that university enrollment is exhibiting a diverse enrollment trend in terms of the number of racially and ethnically diverse students. Moreover, Bohanon explains that among the rise in diverse student populations are more low-income, first-generation, and nontraditional students. Federal and state funding initiatives attempt to narrow achievement gaps and provide

increased access to higher education. However, a review of unpublished institutional data indicates that many first-generation students, under-represented students, and students with family income levels of less than \$48,000 are not retaining, persisting, or completing at the same level as not first-generation majority students with an estimated family income above \$48,000 (AASCU, 2019). As such, retention and ultimately student completion continues to be troublesome, especially at moderately selective, regional state universities where it is rare to find six-year graduation rates over 50%. Colleges and universities desire to see improved educational outcomes for diverse student populations, but in many cases, that has not been the result (Rassen et al., 2013).

DILEMMA

Northwest is one of four moderately selective institutions in the State of Missouri. Moderately selective is defined by the state as recruiting first-time freshmen with a 21 or higher ACT (or equivalent SAT score) or a combined percentile score totaling at least 100 (State Department of Higher Education, n.d.). The State of Missouri grants moderately selective institutions the opportunity to admit up to 10% of first-time freshmen that do not meet the defined admissions criteria. Newton (2020) discussed how COVID-19 will impact enrollment including an expanding admissions cascade and continuation of fierce competition for students. A growing national trend is institutions moving to test-optional, which removes the requirement of the ACT/SAT for admission decisions (Nadworny, 2020). Northwest Missouri State recently made the decision to move to ACT/SAT test optional for fall 2020 due to COVID-19 test cancellations. Over the last two years, the institution implemented a holistic admissions review. This practice provides an opportunity for students that do not meet the admissions criteria to respond to a series of additional questions. An internal, cross-functional committee reviews the question responses and a final admission decision is rendered.

Northwest has a number of potential opportunities for reaching enrollment goals while closing equity gaps that exist related to retention, persistence, and completion. However, each opportunity must be carefully considered. Grawe (2019) suggests that institutions of all types will see an applicant pool from increasingly diverse backgrounds. Thus, to ensure all students that attend have equal opportunities for success, it will take continued transformative efforts backed by financial investment in the form of additional scholarship dollars and support resources. The Loss/Momentum framework cautions institutions that “looking at student outcomes in a conventional bottom-line way limits a college’s ability to peel back the layers of *why* certain favorable or unfavorable results have developed, and what *specific elements* of students’ paths from enrollment to graduation made the difference between their success and failure” (Rassen et al., 2013).

Additionally, a campus-wide understanding of the opportunities and challenges of today’s increasingly diverse and changing learners is needed to express the importance of becoming co-owners of student success efforts to the entire community.

BEST PRACTICES

Balancing the need to reach enrollment goals while also focusing on closing equity in retention, persistence, and completion is no small feat. As part of Northwest’s continued transformation process, it is utilizing a thorough analysis of institutional data, setting performance measures, and utilizing best practices in student success to close gaps that exists and meet recruitment and retention metrics.

Loss/Momentum Framework

The Loss/Momentum framework includes identified components “universal to almost every student’s experience with post-secondary education” and “pinpoints four key phases that all students move through” (Rassen et al., 2013). The Loss/Momentum framework focuses on the student experience and allows colleges and universities to hone in on how structures, policies, systems, and personnel contribute positively or negatively to student success (Rassen et al., 2013). The four phases include connection, entry, progression, and completion. Student interactions with “policies, practices, programs, and processes, both within and external to the control of the institution, affect the phases” and lead to either losing or gaining momentum toward completion (Baston, 2020).

Academic Advisement

A key component mentioned frequently in the Loss/Momentum framework is academic advisement. Northwest has drastically shifted its model of academic advising as part of its student success transformation. Prior to 2017, faculty performed most academic advising duties and advisement activities were focused primarily on preregistration advising and course scheduling. A new model of academic advisement and success coaching, rooted in proactive, intrusive, and developmental advising practices, launched in July 2017 for first-year students. Referred to as the integrated student success model, all first-year students are assigned a professional advisor that specializes in aiding with the transition to college and conducts outreach based on biweekly areas of focus. During the traditional academic year (August-May), the academic advisor is located in academic buildings working alongside faculty members in the disciplines that they advise. Additionally, a portion of first-year students that do not meet Northwest’s moderately selective admission criteria or those that self-identify as needing more assistance, enroll in a weekly Academic Success Coaching course during their first semester. The one-hour course, taught by an academic success coach that is typically the student’s assigned professional advisor, and a success coaching team of graduate assistants and peer mentors, work one-on-one with students utilizing an intrusive and holistic approach in addition to weekly planning task sheets to jumpstart individual student success. Proactive advisement using a strategic and systematic approach can lead to positive outcomes (Baston, 2020). As indicated in Table 2 (Appendix), Northwest has seen improvement in student success metrics since implementing the integrated model of student success in July 2017, including its two highest retention rates.

Holistic Student Support

As enrollment demographics shift and the number of first-generation and underrepresented students increase, Northwest must analyze the type and level of support it offers students. Best practices indicate that Hispanic students may both need increased levels of support and intervention. “Ensuring progression and completion of a degree for the impending rise of minority prospects with a high demand of support and need becomes even more costly to institutions to achieve student success” (Sanchez, 2018). Taking a personalized approach to student success includes more than just academic support. Baston (2020) suggests that students need advisors who support and inform them with a full gamut of financial and support resources while also monitoring non-academic factors to minimize students needing to stop-out. Additionally, institutions must ensure wellness services that include personal, social, and emotional needs are utilized, including the use of a personalized approach to serving each student in an effort to minimize interruption and academic progress toward degree (Sanchez,

2018). Deploying specific interventions for each student based on individual student goals and the institution's resources offers an opportunity to increase the likelihood a student will retain, persist, and complete their college degree. However, just adding new supports does not translate to student success. Kezar (2019) discussed the *Becoming a Student-Ready College book*, pointing out that author Tia Brown McNair called for "campus leaders to rethink their efforts at wishing for different students while putting in just marginal supports."

Financial Assistance

As the cost of college continues to increase, students rely heavily on financial aid packages to be able to attend, retain, persist, and complete their degree. A student's financial aid package may include both merit and need-based aid. Currently, Northwest awards incoming students mostly merit aid related to their ACT score and high school grade point average and classifies as a need-blind institution. Need-blind institutions do not look at a student's ability to pay when making admissions decisions (College Board, n.d.). Instead, a financial-aid formula determines the amount of money a student receives and is often only a portion of what is needed to cover the cost of college (Selingo, 2020). Selingo reports that the gap between the aid that is awarded to students and the cost of college continues to widen, up 72% since 2008. Currently, over 85% of Northwest freshmen receive financial aid and annual scholarships and grants total over \$19 million (Northwest Financial Assistance, n.d.). As part of the transformation process, Northwest redesigned the American Dream Grant (ADG) Scholarship to cover 100% of tuition and fees for Pell-eligible students that meet merit requirements (Jost, 2017). The redesign of the ADG award along with revising the scholarship model to encourage retention and persistence are just a few of the recent transformative student success efforts to assist with the financial burden student's face today in pursuit of a college degree. Institutions must address how student aid is awarded to balance meeting enrollment goals and continue student success transformation to reduce equity gaps related to retention, persistence, and completion.

Policy Review

As part of the transformation efforts, Northwest is undergoing a policy review and will employ a more systematic approach for continuous policy review. This policy review includes both academic and non-academic policies, with a goal of removing barriers that impede retention, persistence, and completion. Policies are a "strong driver of systems and cultural change" because they "establish the possibilities for action" (Kezar, 2020). At many institutions, policies remain unchanged for years and instead of promoting inclusivity result in exclusivity. Kezar (2020) states that a routine examination of important institutional policies allows the opportunity to "change the ones that create barriers – such as those related to admissions criteria, student advising, curriculum, staff hiring criteria and faculty promotion and tenure." A strong culture of evidence, including inquiry, research, data, and analytics, is essential and should be included in institutional policy and practice review (AASCU Center for Student Success, 2019).

OVERCOMING TRANSFORMATION CHALLENGES

Student success transformation is challenging, requiring perseverance and a significant commitment of both human capital and financial resources. To overcome these challenges, Northwest has used AASCU's Transformation Accelerator Model. AASCU's Transformation Accelerator Model includes focus on structure, leadership, and evidence (AASCU Center for Student Success, 2019). To accelerate transformation, the structure must be considered to include

the university president and provost as members of the cross-functional core transformation team along with frequent opportunities for structured facilitation. Leadership is the second element of AASCU's Transformation Accelerator Model and includes a "unified vision for student success" while supporting "silo-spanning" and involving the campus community as co-owners in the (re)design of student success efforts (AASCU Center for Student Success, 2019) to reach enrollment goals and close equity gaps related to retention, persistence, and completion of first-generation students and students of color. Over the course of the last 15-months, Northwest has involved faculty, staff, and students to define student success, engaged the campus community by holding success forums to highlight data and discuss emerging themes, and despite COVID-19, has created transformation teams to tackle the emerging themes over the next 90-days. Northwest's use of student success forums and transformation action teams allows the opportunity to present evidence in the form of key performance indicators and priority metrics. Both of which help overcome challenges by providing something to strive for. Satell (2020) discusses transformation as something that moves from a have to do to internalizing change and making it something that is done without prompting.

LESSONS LEARNED

Student success transformation work is the same as continuous quality improvement in the fact the work is ongoing. Satell (2020) shared that transformation is achieved when it is fully embedded in the "systems and processes of an organization and becomes the "standard way of working." Northwest has shown its ability to transform student success by rooting the work in everyday conversations, considering the voice of the student, and aligning with the institution's strategic plan. Students have been involved every step of the way in Northwest's most recent transformation efforts. This included holding a forum for students to discuss how they interact with the institution. Students were encouraged to share from their lens and discuss where they go to receive assistance, what they perceive to be the biggest barriers to their retention and persistence, and share potential solutions to consider so the institution becomes easier to navigate. Student conversations help to "build authentic empathy for the student experience" and ensure students do not "pay the price for our failure to talk about failure" (Burns, 2018).

As demographics shift and the number of diverse students increase, Northwest must ensure the voice of the student continues to be central to conversations along with designing supports and services that address changing learner needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Colleges and universities are feeling more pressure than ever to become more transformative and student-centered. With shifting demographics, workforce demands increasing, decreased public confidence in higher education, and financial challenges, colleges and universities must redesign and rethink the programs and services offered (Nietzel, 2020). Kezar (2020) shared that while higher education has worked for decades to move the needle on retention and success of first-generation, marginalized, and low-income students, there has been minimal improvement.

Institutions looking to meet enrollment goals and close equity gaps are recommended to engage in transformative student success work. This work should be evidence based, incorporate the voice of the student, be rooted in best practices, and align with an institution's mission and strategic vision. A comprehensive review of historical institutional enrollment, retention, and

completion data and the Loss/Momentum framework will also prove valuable. Use of the Loss/Momentum framework allows the opportunity to focus on the student experience to determine if students are gaining or losing momentum toward completion at key ventures. Institutions engaging in transformative student success work should also consider review of its academic advising model, academic and non-academic policies, optimization of financial aid, and full review of support resources to ensure holistic student support to meet changing learner needs.

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APPENDIX**Table 1:**

Trends in full-time enrollment, public institutions (2014-2019)

Public, Four-Year University	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	1-year Change	3-year Change	5-year Change
Harris Stowe State University	1,052	1,136	1,251	1,254	1,523	1,453	-4.6%	16.1%	38.1%
Lincoln University	2,284	2,301	2,160	2,035	1,899	1,848	-2.7%	-14.4%	-19.1%
Missouri Southern State University	4,415	4,561	4,869	4,859	4,682	4,295	-8.3%	-11.8%	-2.7%
Missouri State University	17,136	17,528	18,375	18,544	18,195	17,464	-4.0%	-5.0%	1.9%
Missouri University of Science & Technology	7,277	7,487	7,456	7,448	7,235	6,724	-7.1%	-9.8%	-7.6%
Missouri Western State University	4,413	4,152	3,991	4,074	4,155	3,955	-4.8%	-0.9%	-10.4%
Northwest Missouri State University	5,641	5,550	5,495	5,316	5,594	5,740	2.6%	4.5%	1.8%
Southeast Missouri State University	9,478	9,233	9,174	9,000	8,519	8,350	-2.0%	-9.0%	-11.9%
Truman State University	5,535	5,488	5,505	5,482	5,098	4,507	-11.6%	-18.1%	-18.6%
University of Central Missouri	10,413	10,985	10,532	9,468	8,852	8,437	-4.7%	-19.9%	-19.0%
University of Missouri-Columbia	30,526	30,661	28,720	26,632	25,357	25,344	-0.1%	-11.8%	-17.0%
University of Missouri-Kansas City	11,552	11,742	11,814	11,579	11,424	11,335	-0.8%	-4.1%	-1.9%
University of Missouri-St. Louis	10,203	9,917	9,788	9,683	9,487	9,199	-3.0%	-6.0%	-9.8%
Sector Subtotal	119,925	120,741	119,130	115,374	112,020	108,651	-3.0%	-8.8%	-9.4%
Statewide Totals - Publics	184,306	180,347	177,924	172,034	166,414	161,289	-3.1%	-9.3%	-12.5%

Source: Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development – Enrollment Report for Missouri Public & Comprehensive Independent Institutions (2019).

Table 2

Fall-to-fall retention rates at Northwest Missouri State University

Academic Year	Retention Percentage
2018-2019	75.67%
2017-2018	77.97%
2016-2017	73.24%
2015-2016	70.65
2014-2015	71.40%
2013-2014	71.25%
2012-2013	65.83%
2011-2012	67.49%
2010-2011	69.30%
2009-2010	69.76%
2008-2009	72.27%
2007-2008	69.81%
2006-2007	73.51%
2005-2006	71.21%
2004-2005	70.73%

Source: Northwest Missouri State University Institutional Research Dashboard, Retention of first-time, full-time freshmen, Census results (2020).