Institution-Wide Change at Capital University: Examination of Gateway Courses Uncovers University-Level Needs

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Capital University made several transformative changes working with the Gardner Institute through the Foundations of Excellence - First Year Focus project in 2012. Elusive, however, were substantive changes in instruction. We reengaged with the Gardner Institute in 2017 to take a sustained look at classroom experiences and their relationship to student success. We anticipated making changes focused on in class teaching and learning but underestimated making major high impact institutional and structural changes as well. As a result, these changes positively impacted retention, persistence, and graduation rates, even eliminating first generation status as a negative predictor of retention.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

From 2012-2016, Capital University worked to implement nearly 150 action items identified through Foundations of Excellence - First Year Focus to support first year students on campus. In the fall of 2017, a 19 year high in first to second year retention, 78.1%, was achieved and repeated in the fall of 2018. However, one identified area of change remained elusive to significant improvement - changes in curriculum, pedagogy, and teaching. The University was successful in making many changes to create a university-wide support system for students but changes to improve pedagogy and practice in the classroom proved to be more difficult. To address student success, retention, and graduation, much more needed to be done to improve instruction and learning.

In 2017, the university reengaged with the Gardner Institute to examine and improve student performance and success in Gateway Courses. These high enrollment, prerequisite courses typically occur in the first two years of a student's studies and regularly prevent students from progressing and completing their degree. The goal of the project was to identify these courses and help at-risk students persist to complete their four-year degrees. We knew from our previous work that by making changes to improve student learning and completion for these students, the performance of all students would be positively influenced.

METHODS

The Gateways to Completion (G2C) project led Capital University faculty, staff, and administrators through a comprehensive, three-year, self-study. In addition to focusing on the factors inside and outside the classroom that impede student progress, the self-study allowed for the identification of courses that present the most challenge to students. The G2C steering committee consisted of cross-campus representation with each of the teams examining specific courses intentionally included both faculty from the discipline and staff from student development areas. The Steering Committee spent hours auditing potentially problematic policies and procedures. The Steering Committee also identified three courses from different areas of the university for participation in the study.

Faculty leaders in the disciplines were approached about the process and expressed excitement to be involved. With the G2C liaisons, the faculty leaders for each discipline selected committee members from across the institution, ranging from faculty in the department to staff in athletics and academic support areas. Through focused discussions, each committee member contributed their perspective on student success on given topics, resulting in action items specifically to enhance student success in that course.

Our hope was that these action items would not only affect change in the singular course but would be scaled and applied to other courses as well. What we did not expect was the large number of similar action items identified by each course group that were university-wide opportunities for change to better serve students.

OUTCOMES

Over 70 high priority action items were generated that were university-wide changes - focused on systems inside and outside the classroom. Many of these action items were suggested in some form by each of the course level groups. Three of the highest impact university wide changes are highlighted below:

Academic Advising

Capital University employs a faculty advising model where students connect with a faculty member in their discipline from their summer orientation day throughout their entire collegiate experience. The G2C work outlined the need for additional advising support. We created an Advising Office, staffed by Master Advisors (faculty advisor with reassigned time), to provide just-in-time advice on course registration, major change options, and other questions that arise for students when a faculty advisor may not be available. The Advising Office also provides professional development opportunities for advisors and provides mentoring support for new faculty advisors.

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) was also identified by the groups as a way to improve pedagogy across the curriculum. We realized putting a greater emphasis on SOTL by expanding the University's Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT). In the past, CELT had focused solely on supporting faculty teaching, but the new CELT was reorganized to place ownership of student learning, development, and achievement on all University employees, regardless of role. The new Center is team-led by faculty and staff with specialties in pedagogy, technology, and community engagement with a variety of opportunities for engagement, including professional development workshops throughout the academic year as well as focused multi-session workshops on specific courses and co-curricular experiences.

Enhanced Communication to Support Student Success

Somewhat generically, each of the groups identified needs for enhanced communication to better support the system of student success on our campus, but also individual students in their individual needs. We implemented a new early alert system, Beacon, a more robust tool than what we had used in prior years. With the new platform, faculty and staff can share information easily, with our Office of Student Success and each other to alert necessary individuals to allow us to better support individual students and remove barriers to their success. We also began an outreach campaign to help students get information on registering for courses for the next semester. Each semester, this outreach campaign assists students in the removal of barriers to registration including addressing financial holds, academic holds, and other non- academic barriers.

As we followed the implementation plan of these and other action items, Capital has realized vast improvements in student success. We maintained our record first-to-second year retention rates and our graduation rates are approaching an all-time University high. Most notably, Capital has neutralized first generation and commuter statuses as negative predictors of retention and persistence.

PLANS FOR CONTINUATION AND EXPANSION

The success of our implementation allowed us to also focus on larger, more long-term practices. We will take academic advising to a new level at Capital by implementing a hybrid advising model. All students will maintain a faculty mentor to assist and will also have a success advisor who will not only assist with scheduling courses but also address non-academic barriers to success. The student's success advisor will remain consistent throughout their time at Capital, regardless of major changes or additions, and will focus on the combined curricular and co-curricular success of the student. This new model enhances instead of replaces our former model and allows for more dedicated support to each individual student. We have also launched our digital initiative, which focuses on promoting technology access and affordability, enhancing student success services, and transforming instruction and learning. Because of the work already underway from the G2C project, Capital is poised for greater success in all three goal areas. All undergraduate students, as well as faculty and staff will have the same device, access to the same apps for collective use both inside and outside the classroom, and the freedom to think big when developing projects, assignments, co-curricular experiences, and more.

LESSONS LEARNED AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

We learned the importance of engaging a wide variety of campus voices in our early Foundations of Excellence work nearly a decade ago. This led to passionate conversations, substantive changes, and a culture shift toward emphasizing student success at our institution. Participation in the G2C process allowed us to continue this strong culture of cross-campus collaboration to support student learning, engagement, development, and success. In fact, we were able to engage an even more diverse set of individuals, offices, and departments to collaborate to improve the lives of students and our university. The continued growth of this interconnected network is at the forefront of the University's work and is vital to continued growth in student retention, persistence, and graduation.

In our continued work to support students, we have begun to build networks across our community college partners, to break down silos between our campuses to better support students in their transfer experience.