Déjà Vu All Over Again: Whoa—Not So Fast

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Not exactly a news flash: Our colleges and universities are scrambling to make up for declines in undergraduate student enrollment, and we are in search of new sources of revenue, hopefully even cash cows! Graduate students are coming to the rescue! If Yogi Berra were looking at us now, he could rightfully say: Déjà vu all over again!

He could be right, but I am here in print to tell you to hold on. We are learning from our history and are not going to make the same mistakes all over again if some of us, hopefully many of us, can prevent it!

I refer to what our adaptive higher education system did the last time we created a new consumer base: the millions of undergraduate students who joined us thanks to the Higher Education Act of 1965. We became mobbed with students whom we wanted but were not designed for in the first place.

These increased numbers of students required that we expand the sheer numbers of postsecondary institutions and the size of undergraduate populations. And in the name of improving opportunity, upward social mobility, and social justice for millions who previously had not had such access to higher education, we did just this.

We, most of us anyway, wanted those students. Higher education became a sort of Statue of Liberty! Not really prepared for college, no history of college attendance and degree completion in your family, no matter, we've got places for you!

Admit them we did. We took their hopes, dreams, money, and credit, but we also drove huge numbers of them out and away. And they joined the ranks of about 40 million Americans whom we describe as "SCND," "Some College, No Degree!"

The Rise of the Student Success Movement

Thankfully, many of our fellow higher education leaders, faculty, and staff didn't just sit idly by and let this happen. Instead, we assumed that admitting these students gave us

a moral and educational obligation to do as much as possible, educationally and ethically, to support their success.

And by the early 1990s, the academy had created enough interventions to increase chances for completion so that we gave such efforts a two-word term: “student success.”

This became a true bandwagon, sincerely, but also selfishly, for our own institutional welfare. I don’t need to enumerate here the vast array of interventions and initiatives we created. You, my readers, know all about these. Many of you were or are involved in providing these forms of student support.

And which students were the focus of our efforts?

That is a hugely important question.

The answer: undergraduate students!

And, in particular, undergraduates who were first-generation college students or members of subpopulations that had not historically attended college in significant numbers, with the temporary exception of millions of veterans of World War II and the Korean War, whose grateful nation and government decided to thank them and fund their pursuit of a college degree.

Who Was Missing?

And who were we not talking about? Who were we not including in these categories of students whose success would likely not be realized without our support?

Graduate students!

For the life of me, I have worked in American higher education for this whole time period, from the adoption of the Higher Education Act in 1965 to the present, 2026. I can explain why we decided to develop “student success” initiatives, for what populations, and what we offered in the name of student success.

But I have been struggling to understand why we didn’t include graduate students in the first place or even up to now.

By limiting student success initiatives, we have been excluding approximately 4 million graduate and professional students per year. In retrospect, this exclusion strikes me as being not only arbitrary and discriminatory, but appalling!

After all, it wasn't because we didn't need these graduate and professional students. We knew we needed our physicians, dentists, therapists, nurses, lawyers, researchers, professors, teachers, etc. But until recently, knowing we needed them was not enough reason to include them in "student success" efforts.

And we knew that American graduate education had also become the gold standard for the world's graduate education, and that was without including graduate students in "student success" efforts!

Why Didn't We Include Graduate Students?

So why didn't we include them? Here are some possible reasons:

- We hadn't done so before.
- We didn't believe that graduate students needed this kind of support.
- It was not part of the graduate and professional student tradition and was not included in the generally accepted practices of needed and appropriate graduate education.
- We had not even talked about including them in student success efforts. Not doing so was largely unquestioned and unchallenged. It was truly the accepted status quo.
- Also, and very importantly, paying attention to the care and feeding of graduate students was not something we had experienced. So why would we offer it for our successors? After all, we made it "on our own," so today's students should as well.
- Graduate student success was not a candidate for special funding initiatives from federal and state governments, nor was it a priority for the foundations that funded "student success" initiatives. Alas, there were no special sources of external funds to provide this support even if we had wanted to do so.

Are We About to Repeat Ourselves?

So now, when undergraduate enrollments in some institutions are threatened and declining, it isn't surprising that the academy is turning to other populations who could replace undergraduates.

And it isn't surprising that the new opportunities we are providing are disproportionately online master's degrees. These degrees are less resource intensive than more traditional undergraduate and graduate education programs.

And this is exactly when Yogi Berra would have said, "Déjà vu all over again," meaning admitting large numbers of new students for whom higher education had not been historically designed and offering them educational experiences that were as labor- and cost-efficient as possible, with minimal provision of non-instructional, costly resources.

That's exactly what we did in the post-1965 boom and what we finally began to move away from in the early 1980s with the arrival of a focus on both "the first-year experience" and the delivery of a much more comprehensive array of what we came to call "student success" and "high-impact practices" supports.

This evolution made it possible then to admit students and support them if, and only if, they were undergraduate students.

A New Direction for Graduate Student Success

And then, lo and behold, from my vantage point anyway, we in the academy are now moving away from "déjà vu all over again" and taking steps to expand the student success focus to include and embrace graduate and professional students.

Thus, I would argue that we can no longer say what Yogi would have been saying because of the steps we are now taking in this new movement currently termed "the graduate student experience."

That is precisely the purpose of the resource hub structure that puts forth this reflection on the extraordinary transition that is currently underway in American graduate and professional student education, moving to include graduate and professional students as being deserving of "student success" attention and support.

Thank goodness.

It's been a long march toward justice in American higher education, but we are now taking new steps to bring us closer to that aspiration.

About the Author

John N. Gardner is co-founder and executive chair of the Gardner Institute. He is an educator, university professor and administrator, nonprofit organization founder, author, public speaker, consultant, public intellectual and thought leader, change agent, and student retention specialist. He has been an advocate for first-year, sophomore, transfer, and senior-year students and an initiator and scholar of multiple undergraduate education reform movements.

Gardner and his wife, Betsy O. Barefoot, founded the Gardner Institute in October 1999.

Graduate & Professional Student Experience