The Role Of Department Chairs In Student Success

By Karen Doss

Bowman

About five years ago, faculty in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse did a gut check: Pass/fail rates aside, were their students *really* learning in the classroom?

Timothy Dale, now chair of the department, recalls that conversations about student success began when his predecessor prompted the faculty to read and discuss "Dysfunctional Illusions of Rigor: Lessons from the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning." The book chapter, written by Craig E. Nelson and published in *To Improve the Academy: Resources for Faculty, Instructional, and Organizational Development* (Vol. 28, 2010), examines traditional teaching methods and philosophies that aren't conducive to learning—such as the belief that making a class more difficult serves to "weed out" students who aren't capable or interested in the subject matter.

These discussions, along with several other initiatives, sparked a culture shift in the department that now puts student success front and center. Other efforts include creating a curriculum map of courses and expected learning outcomes, revising the faculty review process to include mandatory classroom observations, and encouraging scholarship of teaching and learning as part of annual performance evaluations. The change has been gradual, but steady.

"It's really hard to measure culture, but I can tell you that we have more conversations about student success than ever before," says Dale, who became chair a year and a half ago. "We're talking about it, and faculty are thinking about it when they walk into the classroom. Teaching is not something people are considering in a vacuum. We're moving away from that philosophy to one in which people are turning to each other with their teaching problems: 'I tried this assignment, and it didn't work—What did I do wrong?' or 'I just gave a test and the students did poorly—Why is this a bad test?' We're

moving away from the classic image of faculty bragging about how many students they've failed, to an approach where we ask each other these questions [so that we can do a better job teaching]. Student success is our success."

Getting Department Chairs Involved

Student success is a central issue in higher education. Many colleges and universities have campus-wide initiatives dedicated to boosting student learning. But academic department heads also play a critical, yet often overlooked, role in supporting student success—as demonstrated by Dale's experience at UW-La Crosse. After all, department heads oversee key areas tied to student success, such as faculty recruitment, tenure and promotion, and curriculum development. As the chief advocates for their departments, they can leverage their positions to create cultures that are focused on helping students succeed.

"The goal is to get to the point that whenever department chairs have a task in front of them, they are constantly thinking, 'How can I do this in a way that maximizes student success?'" says Amanda Cook, former program manager for AASCU's Division of Academic Leadership and Change.

On many campuses, chairs are elected by department faculty and serve in their posts for several years before the job rotates to someone else. Often, training for the role is limited, or even non-existent. Any training or coaching they do receive typically emphasizes functions such as course scheduling; faculty hiring, promotion and tenure; budgeting and resource allocation; departmental goal setting; and conflict management.

That doesn't mean students aren't a priority for department chairs. But the demands of overseeing day-to-day operations of the department are time-consuming, meaning that deliberate efforts to promote student success may be inadequate. However, it's imperative for department chairs to understand the various factors that influence student success and to integrate strategies that will help students attain their academic goals. Strengthening the department's offerings toward that end will bolster learning outcomes.

"When students begin forming connections to an institution, one of the places they look to for support are their prospective academic departments," says Jillian Kinzie, associate director for the Center for Postsecondary Research and NSSE, Indiana University School of Education. "So department chairs need to understand where students are developmentally, what major issues the students are facing, and what critical elements can be enacted within the academic departments to promote student success. It's a complicated scenario, but what it boils down to is the more department chairs understand about the critical elements of student success, the more likely they'll be able to tweak, to organize and to raise critical questions about how their departments are influencing those aspects of student success that matter."

Mapping Student Success

Student success isn't just measured in graduation rates, though that is an important factor. But retention rates, intellectual growth, social and emotional development, and career outlook and success are other elements that are part of the conversation centered around student success.

"Success isn't just about having students walk down the aisle to receive a degree," says Jo Arney, program director for AASCU's Re-Imagining the First Year of College (RFY) and former department chair at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. "It's also about gaining the skill sets they'll need to be successful after college."

There are numerous actions department chairs can take to establish pathways for student success. These include:

◆ **Don't underestimate the first-year experience.** The first year of college sets the stage for success in the academy and beyond. Most students who drop out of college do so between the first and second year, so many campuses are focused on strengthening the first-year experience through special courses, programs and peer mentoring. AASCU's Re-Imagining the First Year project, for example, involves 44 institutions who have committed to dramatically improving the quality of learning and student experience during the first year to boost retention rates and student success. The program is particularly focused on first-generation, low income and students of color—groups that historically have been underrepresented in higher education and are most at risk. "If a student understands what they're supposed to be doing, or understands the end goal from the beginning, they're more likely to be successful," Arney says.

◆ **Use data to make informed decisions.** Department chairs can use data to guide goal-setting, understand enrollment patterns, analyze student performance and retention, and identify potential barriers to student success. Student surveys, as well as demographics and retention and graduation rates, can help faculty and department chairs make decisions about courses and other programming. "It goes without saying that chairs have a lot on their plates," Kinzie says. "However, dedicating a little less attention to management functions—faculty performance reviews, budgeting, hiring and so on—and spending more time focused on understanding the department's student success metrics and studying the quality of the student learning experience will go a long way to improving student success rates."

◆ **Examine gateway courses.** What are student perceptions of these foundational courses that bring them into the department? How are students performing in these classes? Make sure these classes are designed to give students an accurate introduction to the major and taught in a way that gives students a chance to succeed. For example, the professor can supplement traditional lectures with more hands-on learning activities or incorporate technology in the classroom. "We know that multiple section courses almost always have a fairly broad range of student success outcomes," says Randy Swing, a consultant with the Association for Institutional Research. "It's important to understand why that is happening so that the lowest levels of achievement can be raised while you protect what's working at the top end."

◆ **Strengthen academic advising.** Advising is a key element of student success that goes beyond helping students select courses. It includes mentoring students, intervening when they are struggling, encouraging them to participate in co-curricular activities that will help them meet career goals, and so much more. George Mason University's Center for Academic Advising, Retention and Transitions (CAART) brings together advising leadership from across campus "to establish shared expectations, learning outcomes, and assessment measures so that we can be as consistent as possible in helping students achieve their goals," says Kimberly Holmes, assistant dean and director of retention and student success. The effort has worked: Data from Mason's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment shows that students who reported meeting with their academic advisor three times or more graduated within six years at a 95 percent rate, compared to the university's overall 69.8 percent six-year graduation rate. "We see advising as a critical part of achieving student success," Holmes says. "Academic advising is one of the most important things we can do to ensure that students feel supported, connected to campus and clear about their goals."

◆ **Encourage faculty to own student success.** Faculty are on the front lines of student success efforts. They are responsible for creating a positive learning environment using the latest innovations available in their fields and shaping curriculum that promotes completion. Swing has seen a variety of positive ways that department chairs have engaged faculty in student success. At one institution he works with, for example, faculty have participated in writing departmental mission statements that define student success and setting departmental goals to achieve greater student learning. At another, resources are designated to support faculty development in areas such as advising, understanding first-year challenges and understanding successful teaching methods.

Faculty also are role models for students of scholarship and lifelong learning. Department chairs can facilitate positive and frequent student-to-faculty interactions. That helps to strengthen students' sense of belonging to the department and the institution, which increases the likelihood that they will be motivated to succeed.

◆ **Get faculty buy-in.** In many cases, faculty don't think of student success holistically. Instead, they may be only concerned about student success in their own classrooms. "It's not the fault of the faculty," says Dale. "It's just that's how we are brought up as faculty. We're responsible for our classrooms, and we tend to see everything outside of our classrooms as someone else's issue." To overcome this way of thinking, Dale suggests that department chairs begin to promote the idea that everyone in the department—faculty and staff alike—have a responsibility to promote student success. "It's the idea that they are our students as long as they are part of the university— and maybe even beyond that," he says.

Another hurdle for getting faculty on board is the lack of incentives to convince them to take on any extra responsibilities that may be necessary to alter the departmental culture. A professor's paycheck isn't likely to increase because he or she redesigned a course, for example. So it's imperative for department chairs to find ways to meet the goals. In Dale's department at UW-

La Crosse, student success is integrated into the promotion and annual review process. "We're looking for evidence of student learning," Dale says. "What does the feedback from students look like? What do the assignments look like? How have professors incorporated student feedback into their teaching?"

◆ Celebrate achievements. At the beginning of each monthly meeting of UW-La Crosse's Department of Political Science and Public Administration, faculty members share not only their achievements, but those of their students. A student lands an exciting internship or job; another student is engaged in an interesting research project; a student who was struggling successfully completes a learning benchmark. "Celebrating student accomplishments helps to connect us to what's going on with our students across our courses," Dale says. "It's been a great way to start conversations."

AASCU's Role in Student Success

The majority of U.S. college students are enrolled at AASCU schools, and a significant number of them are first-generation, low income or students of color. That makes it critical for AASCU institutions to be leaders in boosting student success and completion rates. Top-level administrators must hold chairs accountable for student success metrics in their departments, but these executives also must support chairs in fulfilling their responsibilities for learning outcomes.

"[Administrators need to] help chairs act on concerning student success data and infuse student success practices in their departments," Kinzie says. "They can do this by providing resources that allow chairs to make sense of and act on data, and to infuse more research-informed practices into their programs."

Kinzie also recommends better training to prepare department chairs to be effective in shaping cultures focused on student success. While constructing budgets, developing curriculum, scheduling, and promotion and tenure are important parts of the job, student success is at the heart of an institution's purpose.

"We don't exist as institutions to retain and promote faculty," Kinzie says. "We exist to promote the success of students and to promote learning. So when we're thinking about scheduling courses, for example, it should be based on what we know is most important for our students to be successful. When we think about retaining faculty, consider what's best for our students' learning. So it really kind of turns the responsibilities of the job on its head to reframe it as student success, and I don't think department chairs get coached much on that. It's a really untapped dimension of their work that needs to be bolstered." **P**

Karen Doss Bowman is a writer and editor based in Bridgewater, Va.