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Why Clusters: Student Success

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ALUMNI ▾

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Office of the President

Why Clusters: Student Success

August 7th, 2016 by Don Bix

My first [blog post](#) took the perspective of reintegrating the liberal arts. This second post is a follow up to that topic and focuses on student success.

There are three parts to student success: (1) **recruiting** of students who resonate with what we are teaching – who come here because of what we have to offer, (2) **retaining** those students because they are integrated into the community, engaged with each other, faculty, staff and the community in their pursuit of knowledge, (3) **graduating** students who are prepared for a career of passion and impact with the requisite skills (read more about this in my upcoming post) and experience to succeed.

The data shows that as many as half the students graduating from college today do not have a job or have one outside their field (including taxi cab driver and food service) and that as many as 47% of students who took out loans believe going to college was a mistake and actually hindered them because of the debt they incurred.

So why are these reasons for clusters?

First, in recruiting, clusters allow us to demonstrate what is unique about Plymouth State. They provide focus and identity (read more about this in my upcoming post) and by organizing all of our programs into seven integrated clusters a bridge is formed between the students who may be undecided in their studies with those who are certain of their major, which creates learning communities that facilitate exploration and discovery across disciplines. They allow us to create families of programs that are uniquely defined, interrelated and that resonate with the region and the students who find that distinctiveness important. In the same spirit of distinctiveness, clusters are also structures that enable students to work in an interdisciplinary capacity that mirrors what it is like to collaboratively work in a connected global environment, identifying and working with others to solve real challenges. The ability to market our uniqueness will attract students and keep them, especially when we provide what we promise.

Having students who come to Plymouth State because of what we have to offer is not only key for recruiting, but it is also the starting point for greatly improved retention. These students will come with an idea of how they fit in. They will be engaged immediately with faculty and other students through thematic general education courses, first year seminars and open laboratories that create a sense of community that spans the disciplines and reintegrates the university. This also applies to their residential and social experience. Residence space can become theme-based open laboratories, as well as using the HUB and Field House with similar goals. Some of you have seen how powerful this can be with the 10,000 steps pilot that bridged art and environment. Our university is the perfect size to make this work.

A critical component for retention in regards to a cluster-based educational experience is advising. Our plan is to have a student success coach assigned to each of the clusters over the coming years to help work with our first year students. Their responsibility will be to help navigate students through their cluster-based education, and start to identify career paths early on. They will help students identify campus resources and aid them in building the non-cognitive skillsets that are critical to succeed in university life and beyond. This will allow professors to mentor and build relationships with their students at the same time. Some of this is being done well currently, but it is not consistent across the university.

As for the financial aspect of student success, while clusters enhance value, they are also a more streamlined organizational structure that empowers and reorganizes what has become a somewhat siloed bureaucracy into a structure that allows us to provide an exceptional education at a cost that matches our reduced tuition and what students today can afford. (You can read more about this in my future post). It also deals with the reality of limited state funding amidst financial competition in the new landscape of higher education.

As students go through their years at PSU, they will build the relationships, skills and experience that will position them well to be global leaders in their fields of study. They will have built connections with other students in a host of disciplines, garnered certificates in thematic areas that intersect their chosen field and they will have seen how their expertise can be teamed with others to successfully solve the challenges of our partner organizations and the world (You can read more about this in my future post). Transition to an impactful career will then be just part of the overall process, not something separate and apart.

I hope as my blog posts continue that you see clusters as a systematic, integrative, self-reinforcing way of thinking that does not compromise, but strengthens and builds on our disciplines with a unique, valuable, and integrated program of studies.

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Wind: WNW at 3; Conditions as of Wed Feb 08 at 04:00 PM EST courtesy of The PSU Weather Center

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