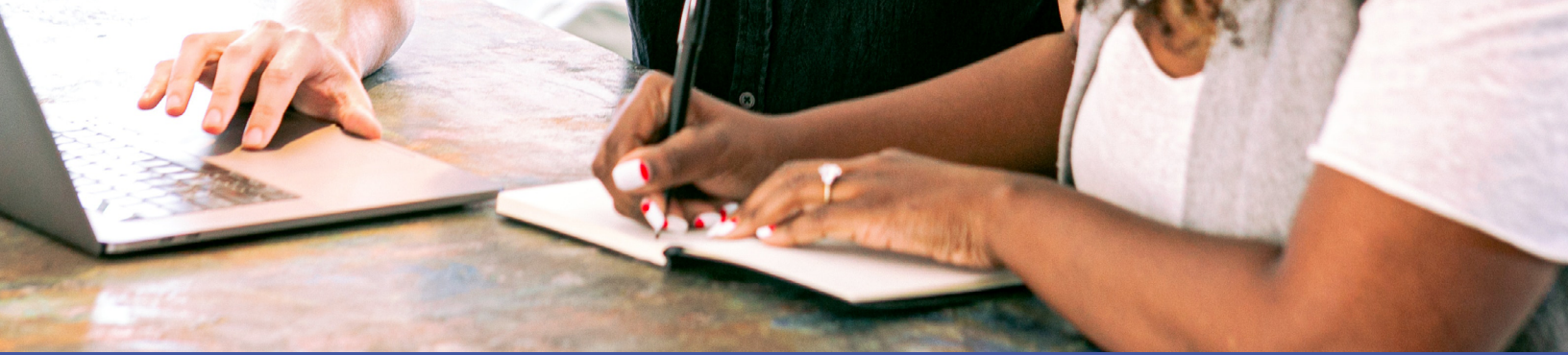


How NC Community College Strategic Plans Support Student Success



Research Team:

Jemilia S. Davis
Andrea L. DeSantis
Pamela Eddy
Karen J. Haley



INTRODUCTION

The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research works with North Carolina's community colleges and leaders to improve student success. To measure progress, it is critical to first capture a snapshot of activities that guide current practices, policies, and procedures at each of the North Carolina community colleges. As part of a broader research agenda to provide a descriptive analysis of executive leadership across North Carolina, this research project focused on the strategic plans developed by the college's president, leadership team, and stakeholders as of January 2020. Strategic plans offer a unique perspective of the mission, values, and goals that guide a college's commitment and desired outcomes, including student success. In this study, 55 of 58 strategic plans were collected and analyzed to examine how colleges documented their intent and progress in promoting student success. Student success is defined by the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program framework that identifies equitable outcomes across student learning, completion, and post-college employment as key factors in advancing college student success (The Aspen Institute, 2019). Understanding how strategic plans highlight the strategic planning process and goals for the institution allows us to give us insight how leaders use this planning process to invoke a college-wide commitment to change. Ultimately, the intention of the process is to support efforts that result in promising practices that ignite students success and transformation in practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, community colleges achieved fairly low completion rates as measured by completion (about 25%; Juszkiwicz, 2017), yet completion rates provide only one measure of student success. Considering community colleges' roles as launching points for four-year university transfer, workforce preparation, and community development provides a fuller picture of student success (Bragg & Durham, 2012; Mullin & Phillippe, 2013). For example, almost half (47%) of the students earning a bachelor's degree in science or engineering had completed some course work at a community college; and nearly a fifth (18%) had earned an associates degree (National Science Board, 2020). The increased use of performance based funding (PBF) by policy makers (D'Amico, Friedel, Katsinas, & Thornton, 2014) highlights for campus leaders the need to pay attention in their planning efforts on improving outcomes for students beyond completion.

Retention and persistence of all students provides a critical step towards completion, and particular focus on minoritized populations of students often is part of PBF metrics.

Ultimately, the intention of the process is to support efforts that result in promising practices that ignite students success and transformation in practice.

With a widening educational attainment gap, critical attention is needed on strategies that promote student success among populations traditionally underserved.

Strategic plans are tools that offer guidance to organizations on how to move toward a common goal (Garza Mitchell & Maldonado, 2015). Plans articulate how colleges will meet their goals including focusing on enhancing student learning, increasing postsecondary credential attainment, providing workforce development training and renewing organizational culture through redefining their missions, visions, and practices (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2008). To guide our work, we looked to Bryson's (2018) strategic planning model. Central to this model is conducting an environmental scan, obtaining clarity on the college's mission and values, engaging in a SWOT analysis, and finally formulating a plan that identifies institutional objectives. Our work was also guided by the Aspen Institute's research on successful change leaders. Wyner (2014) identified five key elements successful colleges do to support student

success. These include commitment to student success; aligning institutional programs; decision-making; willingness to take risks; and building a central vision. Determining which of these elements are evident in strategic plans provides a source for leveraging change on campus.

NORTH CAROLINA CONTEXT

North Carolina's community college leaders are being called to accelerate the state's development of a high-skilled, high-wage workforce by significantly increasing the number of North Carolinians who earn post-secondary credentials that lead to family sustaining wages (myFutureNC, 2019). The North Carolina Community College System, composed of 58 colleges enrolling more than 700,000 students annually, is the third largest system in the country. The comprehensive education program offerings of the colleges include college-transfer, career and technical education, career and college readiness, short-term workforce training, dual enrollment for high school students, and customized job training programs for business and industry. With a widening educational attainment gap, critical attention is needed on strategies that promote student success among populations traditionally underserved.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

A review was conducted of the websites of the 58 community colleges in North Carolina to locate each college's strategic plan. A total of 55 strategic planning documents or websites containing institutional goals, guidelines, and plans were located. In reviewing the strategic planning documents, the research team conducted a content analysis of each plan. Using a qualitative approach to content analysis allows for "subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Documents were coded using the 10 steps of the Strategic Change Cycle (Bryson, 2018) and the four pillars of the Aspen (2018) student success framework. Additional codes emerged based on community college context, values, and operations. Once multiple rounds of coding were completed independently and as a group, themes emerged regarding the planning process and the ways in which the plans addressed student success.

KEY FINDINGS

The review of the 55 strategic plans provides an overall description of the planning documents, process, and how the plans address student success.

A. Strategic plans across North Carolina's community colleges vary in structure, content, and process.

Upon review of the strategic plans, the research team recognized a wide variation in structure, content, and delivery of the strategic planning documents. The documents varied in length from 1 page to 74 pages, and 20% of the plans were web-based only and had no downloadable document available. Several of the web-based plans were linked to institutional effectiveness and Quality Enhancement Plans or were linked to institutional goals without supporting documentation of the strategies or plans to reach the goals. Researchers only used publicly available data; therefore, additional information may exist but was not available online. Nonetheless, the way in which the colleges shared their strategic plans provided insights into the reach of the plans to various stakeholders. Wide variation was also observed in the number of years the strategic plans focused on, ranging between 2-year and 10-year long spans. Over half of the plans were outdated (36%) or expiring in 2020 (17%).

A total of 51 of the 55 plans (93%) reviewed had at least one of the four components of the Aspen Institute's student success framework. Of the 334 goals identified across 55 plans, 167 goals referenced key factors of Aspen's student success framework with 25 of those goals referencing two or more components of student success. The strategic plans collectively demonstrated a targeted focus on labor market outcomes (37%) followed by attention to transfer and completion (28%) and learning (26%). A limited number of plans referenced equity-related goals (9%) for the college. While half of the goals across the colleges' strategic plans referenced Aspen's student success framework, the remaining half addressed how the colleges planned to support students and address college issues.

While some colleges' strategic plans outlined the strategic planning process referencing the stakeholders who participated and the data collected, others provided documents that included the mission, vision, and goals agreed upon by the presumptive strategic planning team. Only one in three of the plans outlined that individuals involved in the process were aware of the strategies associated with the plans and agreed to their roles in achieving the goal. When analyzed using Bryson's (2018) 10-step strategy change cycle for planning, all of the 55 plans reviewed identified a set of goals for the college, and 84% of the plans included specific strategies to reach these goals. Most plans included a mission statement (91%) and vision statement (73%), yet less evidence was found regarding the roles and responsibilities for implementation of the strategies (13%) or the process for review and assessment of the plan (55%).



B. An opportunity exists for campuses to engage in planning efforts that align with the goals of the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) and state labor force needs.

The NCCCS strategic plan (2018-2022) outlines “four key themes related to comprehensively improving community colleges’ educational pipeline:

- » **Student Interest and Access**
- » **Clear and Supported Pathways for Student Progress and Success**
- » **Economic and Workforce Impact**
- » **System Effectiveness.”**

These goals align with the myFutureNC’s 2030 goal to achieve 2 million 25- to 44-year olds in the state with a high-quality postsecondary credential or degree, which aligns with Lumina’s goal of achieving 60% of the Americans with a credential beyond high school by 2025. Notably, these themes intersect with the four elements the Aspen Institute used in defining student success (Learning, Completion, Labor Market, Equity). Currently, the college completion national average is 51.3% with the North Carolina mirroring the national rate at 51.3% (“A Stronger Nation,” 2020). (See <https://luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/2020/#nation>)

Codes for the Aspen elements of student success accounted for 42% of the 334 goals identified across all 55 strategic plans. As a collective, 93% of the 55 strategic plans referenced at least one of the four areas of student success, with most emphasis placed on labor market goals and least emphasis placed on equity. A review of the goals listed in the strategic plans revealed a commitment to overall success, although not evenly distributed across four pillars outlined by Aspen (2018). References to labor market outcomes were most prevalent across the plans with 38 colleges sharing 60 goals (36%) that focused on supporting economic development and strengthening relationships with business and industry. Followed by the labor market pillar was an emphasis on completion and transfer, with 35 colleges referencing a total of 51 goals tied to completion efforts (30.5%). Colleges referenced the intent to design clear pathways to employment and scaling best practices to increase completion. Importantly, 19 of the completion goals were linked with labor outcomes and/or learning goals, and completion was identified as the number one goal on 20 of the 55 plans reviewed (36%). A focus on teaching and learning was also highly evident in the plans with almost half of the colleges (27) identifying 41 goals targeting learning objectives (24.5%). The goals outlined a commitment to provide faculty and staff with training opportunities and promoting student-centered teaching. Lastly, a commitment to equitable student success showed the potential for growth across the colleges’ plans. Even though some colleges touched on equity, only 12 colleges outlined goals that emphasized equity in their strategic goals (9%). Some statements were quite specific (*Making Equity a Priority; Equity: increase equitable access and outcomes for all students across program participation and completion, college transfer, labor market outcomes, learning, and community enhancement.*), whereas others inferred a focus on equity (flexible educational programs to a diverse population).



Limitations existed in the data gathering due to the reliance of materials available on the colleges' websites. It is possible that more updated plans and more details are available on internal campus documents that guide strategic planning in the 58 colleges. As well, the transition of new presidents in the state over the past four years (over half of the colleges have a new president-33) makes it possible that plans are underway to update older strategic planning documents and those set to expire in 2020.

The fact that the goals targeting various components of student success make up 42% of the total goals underscores how North Carolina community colleges are also focused on a broader range of goals to support students. For example, additional goals focused on campus operations, to include student support services, a commitment to employee faculty development, improving efficiencies in campus operations, establishing partnerships with K-12 schools, universities, and community partners, increasing enrollment and access, and finances. Ultimately, these broader college infrastructure and operation goals all contribute to the college experience for students. Attention to the campus culture and community context provided the colleges a way to situate their plans based on stakeholder needs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Key findings from this research can inform future topics for the President's Academy at the Belk Center.

1. Strategic planning is a key skill for executive leaders to develop as it is a critical responsibility for shaping a campus culture that will collectively improve holistic student success.

2. To make statewide progress, similar language and goals should be apparent across all 58 colleges allowing for individualized context to inform metrics and plan implementation that aligned with the NC system wide goals.

3. Colleges have the opportunity to use strategic plans as a means to promote equity in student outcomes. While some colleges indicated goals around equity, many did not address this element of student success.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The strategic plans only reveal the publicly documented plans available online to implement strategies that promote student success. There may be additional aspects of the strategic planning process that colleges retained, but did not make available as part of the documentation including stakeholder engagement and plans for evaluating the outlined goals. Whether these strategies have been effectively and efficiently executed and student success outcomes have increased was not part of this project and could be explored. A quantitative approach could be used to observe how colleges who listed key performance indicators as a measure of success fared over the period of time of their strategic plans. This can help identify activities from the strategic plan that relate to growth in key student success outcomes. A qualitative approach can investigate the process by which an executive leader guides the strategic planning process effectively on their campus. This can reveal ways in which we executive leaders are equipped to guide the process. Understanding more about how campus leaders view strategic planning as a vehicle for change would provide insight into how goals for student success are articulated on campus and what metrics for achievement are in place.

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