Access Culture: Student-Centricity and Supporting Underserved Populations

Dana Dunn | Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor, UNC Greensboro

To meet the 60-percent attainment goal, institutions must look beyond their traditional audiences and find ways to adequately serve demographics not traditionally focused on by colleges and universities—but it takes more than just opening the door to helping these learners succeed.

Increasing numbers of institutions are searching for ways to serve broader demographics. After all, the target date for 60-percent attainment is looming larger and, given the importance of a postsecondary education to a successful career, institutional leaders are recognizing the critical role they need to play in supporting the economy. This requires institutions to look to populations they have not traditionally served—students who may be visible minorities, low-income, out of school for an extended period of time, parents, working, and more. Groups traditionally labelled “high-risk.” Supporting the success of these learners requires an evolved institutional ethos, and in this interview Dana Dunn shares her thoughts on the work colleges and universities turning their focus to these populations need to do.
The Evo.LLution (Evo): Why is it important for postsecondary institutions today to be student-centric, especially when they serve traditionally underserved populations?

Dana Dunn (DD): As one of the nation’s leading student-centric postsecondary institutions, at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) we know that obtaining a college degree is the key to transforming the lives of students from traditionally underserved populations. There is ample evidence that well developed student support infrastructure contributes to enhanced student success for all students, in terms of retention, time to graduation and graduation rates. For students from traditionally underserved populations, this is particularly important. In many cases, they are the first in their families to obtain a degree, may be far from home and find the campus environment like nothing they have experienced before. In addition, they may be struggling with economic challenges and working more to afford their education. They may be less well prepared academically due to having attended low-performing schools. Targeting the appropriate support to students who face challenges is the formula for student success. These students have the determination and “grit” required to succeed, and will, with the proper orientation and support along the way.

For me, it’s exciting and fulfilling to do this work. It’s where the action is in higher education and the promise for the future. It’s one of the many factors that brought me to UNCG two years ago. We provide students both a supportive academic environment and the best that a research university has to offer.

Evo: What are a few key characteristics of a student-centric college or university?

DD: Student-centered universities are focused on providing a holistic support system to foster student success. The approach includes assessing the ways in which students may be at risk and intervening with academic support, guidance and counseling, and in some cases, targeted financial support or other means to reduce costs for students. Student-centered universities focus on identifying the factors inhibiting success and developing plans to address them. Depending on the students’ challenge, solutions could include remediation, tutoring or supplemental instruction, summer bridge programs, developmental advising, or financial planning. Further, we offer high-quality courses using open educational resources, at no cost to students, rather than prohibitively expensive textbooks.

Student-centric institutions send a “we care” message and convey an attitude of “we are in this together.” Student success is our success; it’s why we are here. Student-centric universities are focused on closing the achievement gap. At UNCG, we are very proud of the fact that our efforts have enabled us to close the Black-White achievement gap and to substantially narrow the achievement gap between Pell-eligible and other students.

In A Look at Black Student Success (https://edtrust.org/resource/blackstudentsuccess/), The Education Trust called UNCG a “standout institution where the graduation rate for Black students exceeds the rate for White students by 3.0 percentage points. Not only do Black students at this institution complete their degree requirements at rates higher than their White peers, but these students also surpass the average graduation rate of Black students at all institutions by 13.1 percentage points. Compared with its peers, UNCG is even more impressive. The graduation rate for Black students at UNCG is 18.6 percentage points higher than the rate for Black students at its top 15 peer institutions.”

Evo: Why did you and your colleagues hone in on improving retention and completion among “at-risk” students?

DD: UNCG is one of the most diverse institutions in North Carolina. Nearly 45 percent of our undergraduate students are members of a minority group and one out of every four students is African-American. We are a Minority Serving Institution (MSI) with a large (and growing) Pell-eligible population; the share of students who are Pell grant recipients has risen to 44 percent from 32 percent a decade ago.

While we have students from all socio-economic backgrounds and academic achievement levels, we know that traditionally underserved students face unique challenges. We are dedicated to meeting the needs of these students, to preventing their demographics from becoming their destiny. Looking at population demographics and who we need to reach to increase college enrollment, retention and graduation rates moving forward, students from traditionally underserved populations are where we see the greatest population growth. Where higher education can make the most difference, and add the most value is among this group. It’s an incredible opportunity.

Evo: What were some of the key tactics you put into place to accomplish this goal?

DD: We use a combination of data and hands-on care, a series of multiple touch points to meet the different needs of our students. Data informs the manner with which we target and direct student support. Predictive modeling helps us identify students who may be less likely to succeed without support. We are deliberate about monitoring students’ progress and intervening early on when there is an indication of a problem. We encourage the use of “high-impact practices” to promote learning. These are active-learning strategies that engage students and motivate them to succeed.

Evo: Looking long term, how do you hope your experience with this work helps to transform higher education delivery across the United States?

DD: By addressing the needs of our diverse student body, we are beginning to transform education on our campus. Looking forward, we want to share what we have learned to impact students across the country, an opportunity recently afforded to us by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. UNCG was chosen to join 30 other institutions nationwide in the Frontier Set (http://postsecondary.gatesfoundation.org/frontier-set-fact-sheet/) project, a new effort to help close achievement gaps, better prepare students for college and help improve educational outcomes for students who will benefit from additional institutional support. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the project seeks to identify successful strategies to improve graduation rates, especially for low-income, first-generation and students of color.

http://evollution.com/attracting-students/accessibility/access-culture-student-centricity-and-supporting-underserved-populations/
Among the institutions that are part of this program, UNCG was chosen as one of just six to be part of a special cohort to share a $6-million grant from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), to help build on its tradition of opportunity and excellence by providing innovative and comprehensive support programs to help at-risk students achieve positive outcomes and real success at the university level.

If we all succeed, we will see substantial increases in the numbers of college graduates, our economy and our society will benefit from the contributions of these educated, informed citizens. Education is the promise of the future. This work is key to achieving that promise.

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Key Takeaways

- Student centricity from a university demands offering a truly holistic support system across the institution designed to foster success.
- Higher education institutions across the country should be increasing their focus supporting access and success among traditionally underserved student demographics.