This chapter describes how Valencia Community College in Florida developed a strategy that would move it from the already much better than average results in student learning, persistence, and success it was achieving toward the quantum level of improvement.

Focus on the Front Door of the College

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In the mid-1990s, Valencia Community College was in the early stages of what was then called the Learning Centered Initiative. As a part of this process, a consultant was engaged to work with the student affairs staff in planning their new initiatives to support improved student success and learning. During one of the meetings with a large number of staff, the consultant asked, “Does Valencia have an underlying model of student development to guide its strategies in deploying resources in student development and services?” Someone in the room spoke up and said, “Yes!” The consultant then asked, “What is it?” After a long pause, the same staff member called out, “No!”

This was a signal moment, a turning point in the college-wide conversation concerning the improvement of student learning. Absent any other conscious model of engagement, the college had gravitated to the dominant mode of service in our culture—retail customer service—and to perfecting its operations. Services had been thoughtfully clustered and physically arranged so students would experience a more rational service delivery model in something of a food court on each of the several campuses. Leadership for these services had been centralized, even though academic services remained somewhat decentralized, an important step toward assuring consistency of services and enabling the very conversation in which the consultant was engaged with the college. Communication systems with prospective and current students had been rationalized around a local adaptation of enrollment management. However, none of this effort had yet
matured into a model of delivery that spoke clearly to student learning and success. Moreover, the fundamental organizational culture was still somewhat siloed, both within student affairs and across the other major divisions of the college, especially in academic affairs. The college fundamentally lacked a strategy that would move it from the already much better than average results in student learning, persistence, and success it was achieving toward the quantum level of improvement that was being discussed among its many learning-centered change agents. This lack of a “hedgehog concept” (a strong and concrete paradigm around which the strategy of improvement is built) was an important obstacle to the college achieving results that would take it from good to great (Collins, 2001). The lack of such a strategy was not caused by an absence of concern for or expertise in student learning and success. Rather, this disconnect was the result of a lack of a clear theory of work on which to build a strategy that could contribute powerfully to these important outcomes.

This chapter describes how such a theory of work was developed and how it resulted in new and powerful strategies for improving student performance by focusing much of our effort on the earliest experiences of students in their transition to college, both in the classroom and in the systems and processes of induction into the college, as we now say, “at the front door.”

Valencia Community College

Founded in 1967 in Orlando, Florida, Valencia serves some fifty thousand credit students per year (unduplicated head count) on six campuses; two-thirds of the student body are pursuing Associate of Arts degrees toward college transfer and one-third are in technical degree and certificate programs. In the mid-1990s, the college began a deep and lasting dialog on the learning college paradigm (Barr and Tagg, 1995; O’Balion, 1994a). For the first several years, the work was preparatory, developing a common language and purposes for reform, and concentrating on staff and faculty development. By the year 2000, the work was beginning to shift to deeper changes in the systems, strategy, and intended outcomes for the college. A new strategic learning plan, adopted in 2002, signaled a focus on several important goals, including one called “Start Right,” relating to much of the discussion below.

Developing a Theory of Work

There is an old joke about a millionaire businessman who is appointed to lead a distinguished academic institution. In his first senior staff meeting, he lays down the law to the vice presidents and provosts, indicating that he has always enjoyed success in business because he was ruthless in applying the discipline of business to his work, and he expected the same to be true of the university. “It worked for me in business,” he declared, “and by golly it will work in higher education.” The room was silent until the senior aca-
A real-life parallel to this in the work of educational improvement is the exhortation to employ the CASE (copy and steal everything) method. There is certainly nothing wrong with learning from one another’s work and avoiding the reinvention of the wheel; nevertheless, there is a fundamental problem with reliance on this approach for securing lasting improvements in our work and that of our students. It is not enough to know that something works somewhere else; one must know why it works there, how our context differs from theirs, which theory the intervention is based upon, and more. This is especially true when there is no single treatment, no silver bullet that will secure dramatically improved results, as is usually the case in education. Because the environment for learning is shaped by dozens of people who are making thousands of daily decisions, implementing projects or treatments benchmarked at other colleges or gleaned from a best practices conference is likely to produce disappointing results. Simply copying other programs fails to engage influences and influencers beyond the treatment itself. What is needed is not just a new treatment, but a completely new pervasive approach deep in the college based on a shared theory of work.

Such a theory of work provides the connection between broad shared purposes and specific strategies at every level of the organization. It enables individuals and work groups throughout the college to contribute uniquely to the results with congruent effort, without the confining limitations of command and control. Having such a core model of work also allows genuine strategic focus where the college designs systemic interventions and evaluates their success, troubleshoots solutions, and interprets the assessment of their impact on students. The model, if developed out of genuinely collaborative effort, supplies the language of authentic reform and the basis for evaluation.

Valencia’s theories for improving student performance emerged out of extensive conversations nourished by data and the best in professional literature and practice. Rather than leaping into problem solving, the college had the luxury and the discipline to keep itself in the mode of inquiry—open to data that described what students were really experiencing, wondering together what this might mean, and seeking explanations that could qualify as a theory worth acting on. These conversations helped develop a deep sense of shared practice among hundreds of participants, preparing the ground for naming powerful goals and seeking strategies that could achieve them.

What the Data Told Us

Even though we had developed sophisticated models of data analysis to gauge the effects of our collaborative work on student performance, it was actually very simple numbers that guided us to our most powerful theories of work. In this case, just three conclusions were seminal. First, we discovered that one of the most powerful predictors of graduation was success in
the first few courses, just fifteen semester credit hours, on the first attempt. Yet our data revealed what we probably already knew only too well—far too many of our students experienced withdrawal or failure in their first courses at the college. This did not require a sophisticated data model; we simply asked, "What are the top twenty most difficult courses for our students, or operationally, which twenty courses have the lowest success rates as measured by receiving grades of C or better." Virtually all of these courses were typical of the first semester of many of our students. When we combined this with a ranking of our top twenty courses by enrollment, the pattern was clear. Many of our most heavily enrolled courses were also our least productive, with success rates hovering around 50 percent. Furthermore, these twenty courses accounted for nearly 40 percent of the total enrollment at the college. Because they were clustered at the front door of the college, they constituted a major barrier for many of our students.

This discovery, as obvious as it seems in retrospect, led to rich discussion involving hundreds of faculty and staff. The result was a sense of both despair and hope, a powerful potion for institutional change. We despaired that despite many efforts to improve developmental education at the college, so many of our students were experiencing failure at the front door. We were encouraged, however, by the thought that changing the pattern did not require changing a large percentage of the thousands of courses we offer. If we focused our efforts on just twenty or so courses, we could change the experience of thousands of students and launch them into an educational trajectory that promised dramatically improved performance throughout their careers, resulting in significant increases in the rates of graduation.

Our new theory of work, then, was very straightforward: improving student readiness for college and their performance at the front door would cascade through the rest of their programs at the college. Because so much of their first experiences of the college were mediated by their early contacts in the recruitment, transition, and induction into the college, a coordinated approach by student and academic affairs was essential. The shorthand language we created to convey this theory to one another in our work was captured in one of the seven goals of our Strategic Learning Plan: Start Right—Ensure that students experience extraordinary success in their earliest encounters with the college and establish a solid foundation for success in future learning.

Creating a Model of Student Support

Some of the earliest work based on the Start Right theory was in student affairs as they had already begun to think systemically and act on the theory. Teams of student affairs professionals, with faculty involvement, scoured the literature for a model that fit our students. The one that was adopted was based on a developmental view of first-time, in-college stu-

We then added several big ideas to the Start Right theory. First, we felt that our students must experience connection and direction. Engagement with the college begins long before the student's first classroom experience and is subject to serious improvement through thoughtful systems of engagement in student affairs and elsewhere. To engage students as learners before the first class and beyond became an organizing objective of systems design. Further, most students lack even a rudimentary education plan that will carry them to graduation. We found that most faculty and staff did not take their program planning seriously enough to ask students to write their plans down until their program was nearly completed and they filed an application to graduate. Here was an activity that could be productively moved to the beginning of a student's contact with the college. Our goal is for students to have a plan to graduate as early as possible in their program at the college, and we have developed systems to facilitate this.

On another level, it became clear that the processes, communications, tasks, and systems that students experience in student affairs ought to be considered a part of their overall learning environment. Accordingly, it is necessary to require intentional curriculum and real expectations for what a student is to learn. In addition, real expectations imply assessment of what is, in fact, learned. An important component of this is the notion of gradually transferring competence and responsibility to students as they learn. So early in their careers, the college assumes heavy responsibility for the student's progress through the institution. Nevertheless, gradually the student develops competence in planning and navigating his program and the college's systems, so he is capable to manage the next stage of his learning journey upon graduation. Planning, scheduling, and discerning future educational and career opportunities; knowing one's learning style; and applying this knowledge for one's own learning success have become a part of the curriculum of student affairs. All of these are incorporated into a new trilogy of systems that undergirds our model of student affairs.

LifeMap

The first part of the trilogy is LifeMap, a developmental advising model that promotes social and academic integration, education and career planning, and acquisition of study and life skills. It is primarily about student planning and goal setting; creating a normative expectation that students have life, career, and academic goals; setting up a system to establish and document those goals; developing assessment processes to evaluate and revise these goals; and documenting the achievement of goals. LifeMap describes for students what they should be doing for each of five stages of their development. Each stage of the model includes an outcome, performance
indicators, and guiding principles that tie to the literature on best practices. The five stages are:

- College Transition (middle and high school to college decision making)
- Introduction to College (0–15 credit hours)
- Progression to Degree (16–44 credit hours)
- Graduation Transition (45–60 credit hours)
- Lifelong Learning (learning beyond a first degree)

Details for the curriculum can be viewed online at http://valenciacc.edu/lifemap/stages.

The model was implemented and continues to be supported in three ways. First, there was a system redesign of virtually every process in student affairs based on a gap analysis of current practice and LifeMap ideals. Second, heavy investments in staff and faculty development about LifeMap enabled them to connect these processes, communications with students, and course experiences to the stages of LifeMap. Third, a consistent and creative internal marketing effort using engaging images and a memorable tagline ("Life’s a trip, you’ll need directions") worked to connect and direct students to LifeMap resources.

**Atlas**

The most visual expression of the LifeMap model to our students is the college’s student learning portal, called Atlas. It is the digital expression of LifeMap. Developed with extensive collaboration from deans, faculty, and student services professionals with the purpose of enhancing student engagement and learning, LifeMap integrates numerous applications to support students in setting goals, exploring futures, planning to graduate, managing schedules, and documenting their own learning. Built on a standard student information system platform, most of these applications were homegrown at the time of deployment, although some have been replaced by tools now available in the marketplace. Other important features include direct e-mail to students, faculty, and staff; a home page for every course at Valencia, including an e-mail list of the class, a syllabus and outline, a chat room and message board; and Atlas groups that anyone on the system can create and join.

Most college portals include the standard tools for conducting business with the college, such as registration, progress reports, degree audits, payment records, and catalog information. To these, Atlas adds four important planning tools—My Career Planner, My Education Plan, My Portfolio, and My Job Prospects. Each of these has a wide variety of features to enhance student planning and is accessible to faculty, advisors, and other staff who assist students with setting and achieving their goals.

Atlas is introduced to all new students in the orientation program and is further supported by online tutorials for each application. The campuses
support Atlas labs where students can use the system in a supported environment. In the student success course, which all new students are encouraged to enroll in, the curriculum includes Atlas, with time in the lab as a part of the course and the development of a plan to graduate in My Education Plan as a required outcome of the course.

**The Service Delivery Model**

The third element of the trilogy of systems is a new, learning-centered service delivery model. Like all colleges, this model at Valencia was designed to facilitate processes such as application, financial aid award and disbursement, assessment and placement, new student orientation fee payment, and other essential transactions. However, we know that these processes are often frustrating to students—especially at the front door—and can create an early negative experience. In studying the literature on process reengineering (Bede and Burnett, 1999; Hammer and Champy, 1993; Hammer and Stanton, 1995), we concluded that a major problem in the traditional delivery model is that students get information in a disjointed, piecemeal fashion, reflecting the silos in our organization, about a process that is really end-to-end, from initial interest to a seat in a class.

The college redesigned its service delivery model so that students learn the entire model in one place with the assistance of cross-trained staff members who focus on the learning process rather than just giving answers to disjointed questions. Staff members are trained and encouraged to work with each student as a learner, guiding not only their immediate transaction, but teaching them one-to-one about the whole process and raising their competence in Atlas, where 80 percent of student questions and needs can be met. An important change in the model to facilitate this kind of attention was relieving the front-line staff from responsibility for telephone inquiries. Instead, all e-mail and telephone calls are handled by the enrollment services call center. Similarly, it was essential to separate the staff members who deliver direct services to students from those whose primary job is processing and verifying information. There are still offices that of necessity specialize in their services, such as disability services, but the vast majority of student services are now delivered in this more learning-centered, one-stop model.

**Other Start Right Changes**

In addition to the systems described above, a number of important procedural changes were implemented under the Start Right rubric. For example, the college

- Made a commitment to mandatory assessment, placement, and course sequence of students in developmental education, regardless of short-term enrollment effects.
• Redesigned admissions, implementing a genuine application and admissions deadline as well as stretching out the process over several more weeks, to reduce daily traffic and allocate more time for advising, orientation, assessment and placement, and the other processes that need to be completed before the first classes meet.

• Added flex start terms, additional time periods during each major term in which students can start courses, so that students can get into classes after appropriately completing the induction process, regardless of when they start the process.

• Eliminated the negative effects of late registration and add-drop on the first week of instruction by adopting a policy that no students can be added to a class that has already met. This strategy in particular required serious redesign of our systems, in particular the development of a precision scheduling model to reduce or eliminate class cancellations and additions in the last few weeks of registration.

These strategies necessarily require deep coordination and collaboration among the student affairs and academic affairs leadership in their design, and all of the staff and faculty in their implementation. It is important to note that this strategy had the most impact on establishing a belief that the college leadership was genuinely serious about changing the conditions of teaching and learning in the college, earning credibility that has been essential to continuing momentum for thoughtful institutional change.

**Start Right in Front Door Courses**

As the work progressed, effort was focused on the experiences of students in both developmental first courses and in those college level courses common to the first semester or two, referred to in our work as *gateway courses*. Again, the simplest data best informed our theory and therefore our strategies. Of the ten most difficult courses in the college, seven were mathematics courses and two of the other three were applied mathematics courses such as macroeconomics. Therefore, we added the notion that the majority of our students struggle with quantitative reasoning and that securing improved results in mathematics would be fundamental to their success at the front door and beyond.

All of this work had been assisted by the college’s participation in the League for Innovations’ Vanguard Learning College and in the Lumina Foundation’s Achieving the Dream movement. The former was particularly helpful in inculcating a culture of Learning First, another of our goals in the Strategic Learning Plan. The latter added to our agenda an essential commitment to closing the gap in student performance among students of different ethnicities, incomes, and preparation for college.

The college identified three primary strategies, already proven to work somewhere in the institution, to bring to scale across the entire college dis-
trict, and to measure their impact by assessing gains in student success in six key courses. These were essentially three developmental mathematics courses, College Algebra, U.S. Government, and English Composition I. U.S. Government and English Composition were selected because they are high-enrollment courses with relatively low success rates for new students. Other Start Right courses would be added as the work progresses.

The first of the three strategies is supplemental learning, adapted to our needs from the nationally known model of supplemental instruction (Stone and Jacobs, 2008). In this model, students who have already been successful in a selected course receive training and take the course again as a model learner and peer to first-time students. Their role is not the same as a peer tutor, but like a tutor, they lend much needed support to other learners, both in and beyond the classroom. Coordinating this strategy with learning and math lab resources has proven very effective, resulting in substantial improvements in success rates for all students and an almost breathtaking closing of the performance gaps among students of different ethnicities.

The second key strategy has been the scaling up of the college’s student success course. Taught as a three-credit-hour college-level course, a third of the first-time-in-college students had been taking this course in recent years. Our data have suggested a substantial positive impact on the performance of students at every point of the performance spectrum. Further scaling this program required moving from voluntary enrollment based on advising to mandating the course for students requiring the most substantial remediation. Again, the results have been compelling; the course has reduced student failure by a third among those mandated into the program, and the college is considering applying the mandate to a larger group of developmental students in future years.

Third among the gateway course strategies has been scaling up learning communities in students’ earliest experiences of the college. These take several forms, ranging from linking Student Success with other front-door classes in a team-taught environment, to a variety of new course designs intended to create both academic and social connections for the students. Some of the most remarkable results have been achieved in these programs, with term-to-term persistence of our most at-risk students exceeding 80 percent.

Results

There are many ways to measure results at the front door. The results at Valencia have been remarkably encouraging, even though the college is still early in its application of strategies based on our theories of work. Two are especially notable. The first is student retention from term to term. Fall to spring persistence of students has grown during the period of these reforms from about 66 percent to more than 80 percent. This reduction in churning bodes well for the chances of students to achieve the milestone of success.
in the first fifteen hours of college. The second indicator of progress is success in the six gateway courses. In five of the six courses, success and persistence rates for all students have increased, with the greatest gains among African American and Hispanic students. In these courses, gaps in achievement have been all but eliminated a full two years ahead of our goals. The sixth course, the lowest level of developmental mathematics, has proven more difficult, and new strategies will be required to achieve results with these students. Nevertheless, our theories of work continue to offer hope that the right combination of interventions will yet be found.

Still to be confirmed is our theory that success in these early experiences will cascade into success in downstream courses, but the early indications are promising. The theories are what give us the common purpose that leverages actions, beliefs, and attitudes beyond our focused strategies that are essential to our success.

Conclusion

Most colleges adopt strategies to improve student performance. The experience at Valencia indicates that a focus on the front door, on creating strategies and environments that increase student engagement, holds great promise for significant improvements in student performance throughout the whole trajectory of their college careers. These approaches are successful because they are built on collaboratively developed theories of work that go deeper than mere best practices to shaping a culture of learning success for students. The common understanding that results from this collaboration unleashes the potential for all faculty and staff to contribute to student success, which amplifies the effect of the theory well beyond that of a few strategies. These same theories also serve to enhance the sustainability of efforts over the extended periods required to make a real difference.

References


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