



# Redesigning the Early College Experience to Maximize Student Success



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**T**he first few weeks of undergraduate education should be a student's springboard into an academic career. But some students disappear even before colleges know they are there.

Student retention has long been a focus of educational research and campus interventions, but few people have examined the earliest stages of students' academic lives. That is changing. A handful of researchers are scrutinizing students' early experiences on campus and devising interventions to simplify curricula requirements, increase the sense of belonging, and provide intensive advising during the first year.

Much of this innovation is taking place at community colleges, home to about a third of American graduates. With help from different organizations, these colleges are developing new ways to support students at risk of stopping out or leaving early without a degree. Many stop-out students are minoritized and the first in their family to go to college.

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The Gardner Institute is one of several organizations that are working closely with state and community colleges to improve educational interventions early in students' academic lives. The key question, says Drew Koch, the chief executive officer of the Gardner Institute, a nonprofit organization focused on student success, is: "How do we onboard, support, and transition students into, through and then out of the first year, and design it in a manner so every student can succeed here?" According to Koch, answering this question will put a stop to the existing situation, in which race, family income, and zip code of residence determine which students will succeed in higher education.

## **From Analytics to Institutional Overhaul**

The Gardner Institute works with colleges with high proportions of minoritized students and students on Pell Grants in redesigning the first two years of college. The project, called "[Transforming the Foundational Post-secondary Experience](#)," starts with an analysis intended to understand a key question: Where are students losing their way?

Using data analytics and visualization, the Gardner Institute helps colleges map their students' paths through the curriculum, beginning with their first courses. This information gives colleges increased transparency on areas where complex course requirements or prerequisites prevent students from advancing into the substantive courses of a major. It also offers colleges more insight

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into opportunities to implement early interventions and to improve the educational success of its students.

Calculus, a gateway course that students must pass before they can proceed in their majors, is a frequent obstacle for first-generation and minoritized students. Colleges have often assumed that the students who failed these courses were simply not smart or hardworking enough to pass them. Many students coming from poorly resourced high schools were often declared not “calculus ready” and assigned to developmental math.

The Gardner Institute's approach works to challenge these assumptions by turning to the data. According to Koch, a closer look at how much advanced courses depend on completion of prerequisite courses, like calculus, reveals that less is required than was once thought. One new approach is to give students instruction in development material and calculus at the same time. Another approach might teach just the core principles of calculus that are needed in successive courses. A course in electrical circuits, for example,

may require only one form of a differential equation. By lowering that initial barrier and providing access to such a course early on in a student's academic career, colleges can better equip budding engineers and inspire them to keep going.

When one institution gave engineering students a circuits course in their first term, even if they hadn't taken calculus, the students graduated at the same and even higher rates as students who had calculus before circuits. "It's not about ability," says Koch. "It's about examining the barriers we put in place."

Koch believes orientations and other onboarding workshops for students should be mandatory, not to be draconian but because otherwise the students most at risk will not attend. "Students who lack financial capital, social capital, and cultural capital don't do optional," he says.

Koch also favors embedded, non-optional peer-support and learning communities, to give all students access to knowledgeable peers who have succeeded in overcoming the same academic challenges that the students are now facing. Embedded peer support, says Koch, can make an eight-percent improvement in first- and second-year retention rates.

## Building a 'Caring Campus'

Many students never even make it into their first class as a result of the antiseptic, online

enrollment process that many institutions have adopted. Brad C. Phillips, president of the Institute for Evidence-Based Change (IEBC), says that too often no one from the college greets the students and says, "Welcome, we are so glad you are here." For IEBC, kindness and compassion seem to be behind the primary drivers of early intervention.

The institute has worked with 116 community colleges, and one of its main programs is called "Caring Campus," which seeks behavioral commitments from faculty and staff members to show students they are part of a caring community. The [behavioral commitments](#) are disarmingly simple and all based on research into the practices of professors who have a track record of keeping their students in college. One commitment, for example, is to learn students' preferred names and use them.

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The IEBC also has a few other key suggestions, such as creating "moments that matter" by having instructors engage students one-on-one to learn about their lives. Instructors

should also consider changing the name of “office hours” to “student hours,” so students realize they are not interrupting the professor’s work but are the central reason the professor is there. The institute advocates for clear, comprehensive syllabi, and early, frequent assignments followed up by help for students who are struggling.

Ken Sherwood, IEBC’s chief operating officer, suggests that all undergraduate institutions develop strategic plans for improving the first year of their students’ education. When Phillips talks to professors, he tells them, “This is not an initiative. This is adding the human component to what you’re already doing. It’s humanizing education.”

At Delta College in University Center, Mich., another institution working with IEBC, Kristin Cornelius was one of the leaders in introducing Caring Campus. According to Cornelius, an English professor, the Caring Campus philosophy matches her own teaching philosophy: “I can’t do anything for my students if they don’t believe that I am in their corner to

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One of the Caring Campus principles, situational fairness, encourages professors to treat students individually when they are not able to turn in assignments on time. Cornelius keeps communication open with students, many of whom have work and family obligations. She objects to the idea that colleges are the main places where students should be taught the importance of deadlines: Whether it’s knowing when to show up to work or to pay bills, students already have a solid understanding of deadlines. “What I’ve noticed,” says Cornelius, “is it’s not so much that they need help understanding what deadlines are. They need someone to understand that they sometimes have multiple deadlines, all at the same time, and there’s only so much time in their day.” For student success, rather than emphasizing bureaucratic rigidity, colleges should focus on academic rigor, she says.

Outside of faculty, staff members are unsung heroes Phillips of IEBC says, and they need to be better utilized in student-success efforts. Staff members are often the first people students come into contact with as they find their way on campus, register for classes, or seek financial aid.

At Irvine Valley College, in Irvine, Calif., staff members were the group first interested in Caring Campus. After some coaching sessions with IEBC, they made some straightforward

commitments. When they can't help a student, for instance, they are committed to doing a "warm hand-off," by calling ahead to another department or walking a student over. "We never want to leave a student feeling that they didn't get the help they needed," says Desiree Ortiz, a senior administrative assistant in the financial-aid department. "We are preparing the institution to be ready for our students instead of making our students be ready for us."

At each higher-education institution, Phillips estimates, 15 percent of faculty are already practicing the suggested behavioral commitments, 80 percent are willing to try, and five percent adamantly stand by a "heck no, we won't go" philosophy.

Phillips's advice on the latter minority: Ignore them. Eventually, the goal at each college IEBC works with is to codify behavioral commitments into job descriptions, hiring, and evaluations.

## Helping Students Set an Academic Path

Hana Lahr, director of applied learning at the Community College Research Center at Teacher's College, Columbia University, has developed a framework with colleagues that she believes will transform how institutions support students in navigating their college careers. Called "[Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan](#)", the framework puts the burden

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on institutions to redesign the onboarding experience for new students. Essential to the framework's toolkit is having advising and admissions counselors who will reach out to students and ask them about their interests, goals, favorite classes in high school, and things that they love to do.

From there, advisors should actively introduce the students to programs or to people related to their interests. The advisors also can inspire the students by steering them in their first year to well-taught courses in an area that might interest them. Lastly, she says, advisors should work with students to build educational plans that will contain the courses they need to achieve their goal and a timeline for completing their course of study.

Such plans, along with giving students clear academic paths toward careers, can help students avoid such frequent obstacles as taking courses that will not count toward their major when they transfer, Lahr says.

"The whole point of this," Lahr says, "is to provide a facilitated, more intentional, guided exploration process for students."

## Filling in Research Gaps

Although some interventions, such as Ask-Connect-Inspire-Plan and Caring Campus, are already in play, educators know they need to learn more about students' first weeks on campus. Two researchers with the Rand Corporation plan a study that will look at why students leave college before the census date, when colleges determine their official

enrollments. The researchers want to understand the context surrounding this time. Do colleges have specific outreach that targets students who stop-out? Are there incentives that colleges can offer students to re-enroll? "One of the aspects that we're interested in looking at is the degree to which different departments or components of the college structure are working together," says Charles A. Goldman, a senior economist with Rand, who is working on the study with Rita T. Karam, a senior policy researcher.

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That issue gets at what many researchers and policymakers in the field want to achieve: Fundamentally redesigning higher-education institutions to make students feel a greater sense of belonging from their first encounters and help provide them with more sustained levels of support to help them complete their education.

*Ascendium is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to helping people reach the education and career goals that matter to them. Ascendium invests in initiatives designed to increase the number of students from low-income backgrounds who complete postsecondary degrees, certificates and workforce training programs, with an emphasis on first-generation students, incarcerated adults, rural community members, and students of color and veterans. Ascendium's work identifies, validates, and expands best practices to promote large-scale change at the institutional, system, and state levels, with the intention of elevating opportunity for all. For more information, visit [ascendiumphilanthropy.org](http://ascendiumphilanthropy.org).*