

 SEMQ REVIEW

Becoming a Student Ready College: A New Culture of Leadership for Student Success

MCNAIR, T. B. , S. ALBERTINE, M. A. COOPER, N. MCDONALD, AND T. MAJOR JR. 2016.
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Reviewed by Brent A. Gage

In the book *Becoming a Student Ready College: A New Culture of Leadership for Student Success*, the authors challenge those in higher education to take a different approach to how they view their role and the students they serve. Authors Tia Brown McNair, Susan Albertine, Michelle Asha Cooper, Nicole McDonald, and Thomas Major Jr. pose a single, yet complex, question to the reader: instead of seeking the ideal student, what if we were able to become the ideal college?

The book opens with the realities that face higher education as shifting demographics and new types of learners enter our campuses who have dissimilar needs than the generations that came before them. In addition, students today come from vastly diverse backgrounds, with different lived experiences than they have in the past. These students experience widely varying levels of degree attainment that beg the question: how can we do better to educate the students we are enrolling now and will enroll in the future? The book calls out the myth that there was a time in which all students arrived at our campuses with the resources and academic preparation required for the rigors ahead. This has never been

the case, and longing for a return to the period (which never occurred) only hinders the essential steps higher education must take to better serve the students of today. The proposed solution at the core of this book is the creation of a culture that focuses on opportunities for learning rather than bemoaning the deficits that students may have when they arrive in our classrooms.

The first section of the book outlines how colleges are not well positioned to serve the students of today and describes how core institutional values and culture can have a profound impact on how students are supported. Organizationally, colleges are loosely coupled systems with a variety of units that operate to fulfill specific roles and functions of the institution, but often lack connectivity around central goals and a larger purpose. The book challenges higher education to put student learning at the center of the mission and discusses strategies of engagement around this mission that permeates the entire organization, regardless of role. Through collaboration and a departure from top-down leadership models, every employee within a higher education community should see themselves as

an educator who is critical to facilitate student learning. Working creatively within the campus community, we can create a culture that engages students and focuses our collective efforts on learning and student success.

The transformation the book describes identifies clear obstacles that are common in higher education, one of which is existing shared governance models. The book suggests, “*We have recommended an intentional top-down and bottom-up, inside-out, and outside-in approach to leadership that is specifically inclusive of all campus constituencies.*” Approaching the challenge of creating a campus culture that champions students reaching their potential involves the entire campus community, not just senior leadership.

In the text, achieving a student ready college builds on the desire of educators to serve our diverse student population and make it a priority. Identifying barriers that get in the way of student success through process evaluation, self-reflection, and understanding the context from which students are trying to navigate attending college while balancing the other elements of their life is critical. Clearly defining student success and building processes and culture that reinforces that definition puts students at the center of the work of higher education faculty and staff. This can occur in the classroom, the dining center, or in any interaction a student has with the institution.

Another key area of emphasis in the book is the importance of symbiotic relationships with external entities that are crucial to student success. Elements such as public transportation, access to resources to assist with tax preparation, food banks, and foundations can

connect the goal of student success to the community by partnering with the institution. Through the cultivation of these partnerships, a set of desired outcomes can be established that are mutually beneficial and advance the success of students. As resources are identified, a college can redefine the boundaries of student support that extend beyond the classroom.

To be a student ready college, the campus culture must employ empathy that translates into belief in the students they serve. Student success is built upon the belief that enrolling students have the necessary skills and abilities if provided the right level of support, guidance, and resources. The book urges campuses to constantly strive to improve the student experience and student success through a deep institutional commitment that permeates through to all members of the campus community. Avoiding the pitfalls of blaming student preparation and the deficits of students, campuses should value their students as learners and help them to thrive.

The challenge the book presents is not a small one, as it involves a shift in paradigm and campus culture. The notion that students are fully equipped and ready for the challenges of college when they arrive at our doorsteps is one that does not serve the student populations of today. Instead of assuming students need to be ready for higher education, the more pressing question is are we ready for them? As student learning and success is central to all institutions of higher education, this book forces us in the higher education community to take a long look in the mirror and ask if we are doing all we can to achieve the primary goal of our institutions.

About the Author



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Brent A. Gage, Ph.D., currently serves as the Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management and Strategy at the University of Iowa. In this role, Dr. Gage oversees all recruitment and enrollment functions including admissions, financial aid, communications, data analytics,

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Dr. Gage has more than 20 years of experience in higher education and has

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Dr. Gage holds degrees from the University of Nebraska at Kearney and Eastern Illinois University and completed his Ph.D. at Indiana State University.