

What Matters Most in Undergraduate Education

Adapted from Felten et al. (2016). *The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 6-7.

Learning matters

- The preeminent purpose of undergraduate education is student learning. Learning must be at the heart of an institution's work and at the top of its priorities. **However, at the most effective colleges and universities, students are not the only ones learning – the institution itself is a learning organization. Individuals and groups in all roles at the institution, from front-line staff members to faculty and administrators, see themselves as active learners.** They strive to question assumptions, inquire into the effectiveness of their work, partner with peers to solve problems, and make evidence-informed decisions.... More than anything else in higher education, learning matters.

Relationships matter

- **Student-faculty, student-staff, and student-student relations are essential to the undergraduate experience.** For a college or university to sustain excellence, however, other structural relationships also matter a great deal, such as those between academic affairs and student affairs, between student success initiatives and the faculty, between the governing board and senior administrators, and between alumni and the college. **A vibrant and inclusive community emerges from the quality of the relationships that undergird it....**

Expectations matter

- **Clear and high expectations are central to the value and impact of an institution. Not only is this the case for student learning in academic courses, but it also holds true beyond the classroom.** Thriving institutions have a sharp focus on the excellence of the entire experience, including everything from admissions and financial aid processes to graduation and alumni affairs.... Since such expectations both create and sustain a college or university's culture, it is especially critical to intentionally set expectations as new students, faculty, staff, and board members enter the institution.

Alignment matters

- **Strong institutions align their resources, policies, and practices with their educational purposes and student characteristics, just as well-designed courses align goals and assessments....** Thriving institutions transform silos into systems by supporting cross-unit coordination and **paying more attention to the student experience** than to how the organizational chart divides up the campus.

Improvement Matters

- **Excellent institutions critically assess student progress and their own effectiveness** on specific, relevant measures, and then use the results of that process to help students deepen their learning and faculty and staff to make improvements in their programs.

Leadership matters

- In strong institutions, **leaders at all levels share a sense of vision and purpose.** Those at the top of the organizational chart are crucial actors, but colleges and universities cannot thrive over the long term when a single person or a small group carries a disproportionate share of the load. Instead **people throughout the organization need to see themselves as part of the leadership team.** This requires everyone to work together to nurture an institutional culture of inclusion, intentionality, and purpose.

