Since 2002, the MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success has recognized 16 community colleges for their exemplary efforts to improve student retention. At the heart of the strategies employed by these colleges is a focus on building connections between students and faculty, staff, and other students.

Drawing from these colleges' experiences, as well as a growing body of research on undergraduate student learning, persistence, and attainment, it becomes increasingly clear that the development of relationships is one of the most significant contributors to improved student outcomes.

So how do community college faculty and staff foster and sustain relationships that promote student success? To learn more, the Initiative identified four of the MetLife Foundation award-winning colleges that also demonstrated unusually high performance on a set of CCSSE survey items that relate to students' relationships on campus. Through focus groups and interviews with students, faculty, student services professionals, and presidents at all four colleges, we looked behind the numbers to see what lessons the data reflect. The four colleges are

- Community College of Denver (Colorado)
- Maui Community College (Hawaii)
- Northwest Vista College (Texas)
- Skagit Valley College (Washington)

What don’t the colleges have in common?
The four colleges vary in size from small (Maui), to medium (Northwest Vista and Skagit Valley), to large (Community College of Denver). One enjoys an island culture where “…you live with people. You see them everywhere.” One college is rural, one suburban, and the fourth serves an urban population. One of the colleges has more than doubled in size in the last five years. The colleges enjoy varying levels of diversity. Three of the colleges serve a majority (54%-73%) of students of color.

What do the colleges have in common?
Each of the colleges enrolls a high percentage of first-generation students. At least half of their students are employed full- or part-time and attend part-time. Many students at each college take developmental courses to prepare for college-level work. All the colleges struggle to find resources, with one seeing its state funding drop from 60% to 25% of its revenue during the past five years.

What works? Voices from award-winning community colleges
We were looking for strategies and found much more! While strategies to intentionally promote and sustain relationships abound at each college, they grow out of a unique campus culture that is grounded in a clear focus and strong values. Faculty and staff on all the campuses use similar words to describe their cultures: “We’re solutions-oriented.” “We take risks.” “We’re positive, optimistic.” “This is an uplifting place to be.” “One of our values is joy.” Though the cultures look and feel different from one another, they share some common elements:

They’re student-centered – “super-sized!”
“What makes it special to work here?” we asked. The most frequent response: “The students!” It’s all about the students, and everyone knows it...including the students. “Students see inspiration in us, and we get inspiration from them. They know we believe in them.” “It’s always important to put yourself in students’ shoes so you’re looking at it from their perspective. It’s ‘what do they need’ not ‘what can we give them?’”

Faculty, staff, and students talk about respecting and valuing each individual’s contribution. They talk about their students’ potential, rather than students’ challenges. “What they come with does not dictate what they are capable of achieving.” They are enthusiastic about the diversity on campus – in age, culture, and experiences.
“Students are attracted by it. Faculty and staff are excited by it.”

Putting students first often goes beyond teaching strategies and support services. Students and staff at all the colleges talk about ways in which everyone is treated as equals. “Everyone is on a first name basis here.” “I credential myself by telling my own story to the students. I was once a student here.” “Everyone’s ideas are welcomed.” In several of the colleges, the philosophy of equality even extends to the parking lot. It’s not uncommon to find the college president circling the lot along with everyone else, searching for a space.

Students recognize that everyone is working to help them succeed. “This is a family I will always come back to for support and understanding. I know they’ll always be here for me.”

**Everybody sings from the same songbook.**

From the students to the president, faculty, and staff – there’s coherence in both word and action. Everyone talks about the college values, philosophy, and approach to teaching and learning. All the colleges emphasize the need to communicate a clear message from the president’s office and throughout the organization. “We have clarity about our vision and an appreciation of what it is we want to do.” Often campus signs reinforce the message.

And there’s more than conversation about what matters. In these colleges, what they say is what they really do. “You have to set the ethic. You have to walk the talk.” For example, a stated value about the power of active and collaborative learning is supported through extensive faculty and staff development. “Our whole first year of training for faculty is around our mission, vision and values, cooperative learning, engaging students, how to be a good teacher.” That same value is communicated to students through learning outcomes and class assignments. “We consistently put students in a position, in learning communities, where we have required linkages that build relationships among the students, that provide longer periods of interaction between the same goal-directed faculty and students, more time on task, more interaction between student cohorts, more active learning.”

**High expectations and continuing support go hand in hand.**

Faculty and staff at the four colleges believe in setting the highest expectations for themselves and for students. “We ask for excellence, and we model it.” A high level of support for students does not lessen academic rigor. “I’ve always believed that you keep the rigor because that’s what the students need and that’s the world they’ll live in and the competition they’ll face. What you vary are the interventions.”

Students understand what’s expected of them. “Being a serious student is recognized here.” They also understand that when the going gets tough, there’s help available from faculty and advisors, often long after they have moved beyond a particular course. “He guides me, shows me different options; he will mentor me. He’s been keeping tabs on me.” “She says I can do it, and here are the tools you need.”

They look for skill, fit, and passion in the people they hire.

Each college’s vision and values drive the hiring process. “When you hire someone, you can look at credentials. Everyone has credentials. Above all, we want a student-centered attitude and a spirit of collaboration.” In all cases, the president or the campus instructional leader interviews every candidate for every full-time faculty position – and often for other full-time positions as well. “I do the ‘passion check.’ Do they really believe in our students, do they want to work with our students, do they believe in the vision we have? The people are what make this work, and everyone’s position counts.” “Successful organizations have the right people doing the right things. I make sure we have a conversation about what it is we’re trying to do at the college and make sure it’s the kind of place you want to be a part of. We’re being very upfront and obvious about that.”

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**One Person – Three Perspectives:**

An administrator offers perspectives from her experiences as a student, a member of the faculty and, now, an administrator at the same MetLife Foundation award-winning college.

As a student, “faculty saw me as an individual, valued my thoughts and perceptions.”

As a member of the faculty, she worked with colleagues “to keep students engaged” and used strategies “to keep students talking with each other and faculty.”

As an administrator, “we set the tone for the rest of the campus. We believe in participatory management and servant leadership.”
They believe in active and collaborative learning – for everyone.
“We are all teachers. We are all learners.” College faculty sharpen teaching skills by learning engagement strategies to connect students with each other and relate content to students’ everyday lives. “We moved from lecture, a teacher-centered environment, to an active student-centered environment. If you’re focused on learners, whatever the discipline, if the students do research, if they give presentations, if they are active, then learning occurs and is strongest. We’ve got good research data to support that. We’ve formalized that.”

Faculty and staff benefit from the same commitment to learning. “It’s one of our college-wide goals – about strengthening the learning community of professionals. We care about each other, and we know that the quality of the relationship among the professional staff will impact the quality of service we provide the students.” Faculty and staff “steal shamelessly” from each other, co-teach, and learn from one another.

The benefit of continuous learning is worth the investment. “If you say something is important, you need to demonstrate it. It’s always been a mystery to me that when budgets get tight, the first thing to go is faculty and staff development dollars. To me, that should be the last thing to go.”

They look for and create partnerships.
Partnerships both inside and outside the college strengthen the learning environment. “Relationships are central to our work – we value that in the community, relationships with our employers, with high schools, relationships among professionals, with our students, and with their families.”

When decisions need to be made, college leaders invite everyone to the table and model what they want their students to learn: “We intentionally work to build on our culture. When we have an issue, we ask, how can we address this issue? It’s not top down. We brainstorm, then we make a decision. Students are involved in a number of meetings. The result is that they see modeling, engagement and interaction among people. People have figured out it’s better to share leadership and responsibility.”

Listening to students is a frequent activity.
Our best teachers are often our students. At colleges that put student relationships at the heart of the enterprise, students understand the value of those relationships. Students at the MetLife Foundation Best-Practice Colleges offer advice to new students:

- Make connections with instructors.
- The school encourages you to get involved. Do it!
- Just ask. Everything you need to be successful is here.
- There’s no need to be stuck; someone will help you.
- Go ahead and do it. It’s the greatest experience you can have!

Self-examination is the norm and data are the starting point.
“We don’t realize how good we are as we always want to raise the bar.” Improvement comes from measuring the results of everything they do. “We want to be a learning college. We want to use the same things we are teaching our students to do—in analyzing how well we do, finding pathways, using that data, using the research to help guide us at getting better.” “We like to say that we’re tough-minded and open-hearted. It’s that inquiry about our practice that makes it better.”

They’re bold, they’re flexible, they take risks.
Do you have a good idea to promote student success that is aligned with your college’s goals and values? Do you have research to support the approach? These colleges will welcome and support your initiative. “We’re like our students: we’re gutsy, we’re not timid, and we’re willing to take calculated risks. We’re strategic…so we don’t go whichever way the wind blows.” And what if your good idea doesn’t work out as you’d hoped? “We have exit strategies, and we believe in them. You don’t stay the course if it isn’t the right course. If this isn’t quite what we thought it would be, we stop it, we drop it, we reconvene, we go a different direction and sometimes modify the strategy if it will get us there.”

The Power of Language
Does language help create the culture or does the culture influence the language? Phrases, words, and terminology are similar across the “relationship” colleges. From creating titles that reflect the college’s values, such as “Dean of Student Success,” college faculty and staff, as well as students, use positive terms:

- “difficult subjects,” not “difficult students”
- “foundation courses,” rather than “the basics,” “remedial” or “developmental courses”
- “most popular classes” refers to the enrollment in developmental classes
- “students who are not as ahead as others,” not “under-prepared students”
Some “Ahas!” and “Oh, yes, we knew that!”

Data mean something. Whether the numbers show something positive or something less positive than we would hope, they tell a story. By looking behind the CCSSE results, by listening carefully and systemically, we can find the stories. What are students’ experiences at the college that the data represent? What are faculty and staff perceptions and experiences that are reflected in the data? What can we learn that we can probe, discuss, and build upon to increase the potential for student success?

Size of enrollment, geography, student level of preparedness, social and economic factors, and the diversity of the student population do not dictate outcomes. The MetLife Foundation award-winning colleges that are showing unusually high performance on CCSSE survey items that relate to student relationships on campus have much in common, but not the factors listed above. While faculty and staff of these colleges consistently point out that they are far from reaching their own goals for student success, they continually pay attention to student needs and have different interventions for different groups and individuals in order to meet those needs.

What we expect is what we get. Students understand high expectations, and when faculty expect more from them, will raise their own expectations for themselves. Many, given the support they need, will meet those expectations. They tell us that they must in order to create the future they want.

Student-centered is more than a concept. The focus on students comes from all directions, including attitudes and language about their potential, rather than their challenges. Students know when they and their success are important to faculty and staff, and they tell us that the belief others have in them makes them want to succeed.

Coherence, coherence, coherence. When we all know where we’re going, and provide support to everyone on the journey, we’re more likely to get there.

To Learn More about Relationships
For more information about the MetLife Foundation Initiative: Building Relationships for Student Success and the MetLife Foundation award-winning colleges, contact Arleen Arnsparger, Project Manager at asarnsparger@comcast.net.