Creating a Data-Informed Culture in Community Colleges - A New Model for Educators

Phillips, Brad C.; Horowitz, Jordan E.
Harvard Education Publishing Group, 2017

Book Review

Tags: assessment | case studies | community college | student learning

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Armed with strong backgrounds in institutional research and effective educational leadership, Phillips and Horowitz provide educators with an excellent resource for improving academic success with proven data use strategies and practices for community colleges. A central, uniting focus of the book is the need for information to be contextual, “useful, useable, and actionable” (9), and the need to enlist the widest number of stakeholders within its ecosystem. Administrators, researchers, faculty, and staff are encouraged to be co-partners in cultivating academic excellence.

Rather than placing data at the center, the authors advocate for a model that places “the use of data” at the center. The book is divided into three sections: (1) “A New Model for Data Use,” (2) “Putting the Model to Work,” and (3) “Case Studies of Data Driven Reform.”

The first part outlines a new model for data use that is user-friendly, improves educational instruction, and maximizes student success, combined with intentional adaptation to those it serves. For example, “few educators want to [be] analysts; they want to be provided with useful information and assisted in applying it toward student success” (56). Attention is also given to analytics, behavioral economics, organizational theory and habits, and the role of emotion in decision making.

In the second section, Phillips and Horowitz reveal a data use model that is put to work removing obstacles to student success. Specific consideration is given to leading and lagging indicators and the employment of backward mapping that begins with the identification of lagging indicators or goals. Attention is then refocused on the leading indicators that influence
them, and which a college has the ability to control and reshape in proactive ways. Lagging
and leading indicators have the ability to switch places from time to time. Scrutiny is also given
to disaggregation and how different demographic subpopulations can impact the design of
programs, services, and policies. The authors make use of a four stage, continuous
improvement approach for use of educational strategies that moves from assessment, to
planning, to implementation, to monitoring, and back again to assessment (110). They believe
that data should be processed in manageable bites and reflect an institution’s unique cultural
context and problem areas (176).

When evaluating outcomes of particular programs or services, Phillips and Horowitz call for
academic institutions to review all other policies and programs that may or may not have an
impact, positively or negatively. When introducing data and discussing it educators need to
make sure that the content is real, that they include moments of humor, that they engage with
the data, and that it works towards a consensus in decision-making. Resistance is another key
factor for community colleges to scrutinize. College staff often bring their “own history of
belief and experiences to the process and accept only information that confirms those beliefs”
(104). Helping people to move outside their comfort zones and embrace change can assist in
creating a positive, data-informed culture.

The last section provides actionable approaches and case studies drawn from community
colleges from differing socio-economic and ethnic settings that intentionally choose to embrace
a data-informed culture and foster proactive uses of information for student success. A failing
institution was among the colleges examined – it had been on the verge of being shut down by
state authorities because of dissatisfaction with its academic quality and student success.

This book is more than a guide for interpreting data by academic researchers. It also provides
a research-based, comprehensive, and practical approach for improving academic excellence
in all areas, and amongst all segments of the college community. This book will help teachers
of religion and theology to increase their classroom effectiveness – in lecturing and interacting
with students.