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Tristan Denley

Personal Story

Tristan Denley, Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Chief Academic Officer of the University System of Georgia (USG), began his career as a research mathematician. His first experience in administration was as the Chair of the mathematics department at the University of Mississippi (aka Ole Miss). It was through this early experience as a department Chair that he first became involved and deeply interested in work around structuring the learning experience to help more students succeed. In 2009, Tristan became the Provost at Austin

Peay State University in Tennessee where he began whole-college innovation focused on producing significant improvements in student outcomes. As part of his work at Austin Peay, he led the design and implementation of an extremely successful co-requisite model and, after leaving to take a leadership role at the Tennessee Board of Regents in 2013, was instrumental in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the first statewide, system-led, prototype-to-scale approach to co-requisite remediation in math and English. In 2017, Tristan joined the University System of Georgia where he has continued his long-established approach to combining rigorous attention to effective data use with faculty and staff engagement, to scale co-requisite remediation, and to implement the first state-wide, comprehensive approach to student success reform that USG calls the "[Momentum Approach](#)."

Policy-Related Overview

The early results of the co-requisite work in Georgia are mirroring those in Tennessee in exciting ways and in ways that, three years ago in Tennessee, were downright surprising to Tristan and his colleagues.

*[When we first began in Georgia], I really expected it to be the case that there would be a level of preparation where, below that level, co-req wouldn't work and we'd need to find another approach. Actually, I was wrong. What we saw was that no matter the level of preparation, every student was **very significantly advantaged** by using this approach. Even students that had ACT scores of 13 or 14 were now passing that credit-bearing class at a 30-40% rate. Of course, we wanted that to be better but 30% or 40% compared to 2% or 3% -- that's an easy decision.*

In fact, the data showed that the co-requisite work not only showed positive results across levels of preparation, but also across student populations.

We really were able to show that ... all students were advantaged by this new technique. What's more, we were able to show that it closed achievement gaps for students in poverty and students of color, and that actually adult students did better than the general population in this kind of approach...The data was so compelling that we simply took it straight to full scale implementation across the whole state.

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When Tristan made the move to Georgia, he embedded the approach to co-requisite remediation tested in Tennessee within a broader framework of student success that included strategies related to guided pathways, advising redesign, academic purpose, and mindset. Taken together, the Momentum Approach was designed to build on, deepen, and scale the student success work undertaken by institutions, albeit often as limited pilots, across the system since 2011. As part of building awareness and support for the work, Tristan visited every one of the 26 institutions to present the Momentum strategies as an integrated set of approaches to improving student success and provided open forums for faculty and staff to raise concerns and together discuss data. In addition to campus-based listening, his team created a set of engagement summits and faculty learning community activities to build a strong sense of shared purpose and local control of implementation. This Momentum strategy is now fully implemented across all 26 institutions in USG.

Through a careful process of engagement with data, listening, deliberation, and refinement, Tristan led a process to take co-requisite remediation to full scale across the system in fall of 2018. Full implementation data, delivered to Tristan days before this interview was conducted in November of 2019, show impressive results: USG has fully doubled success rates in both gateway math and English across the 26 institutions.

When we asked Tristan to reflect on key lessons learned from his work, and suggestions he has for other system leaders, he made a set of recommendations that fall into four areas.

1. Structure system activities to move beyond a traditional “oversight-and-compliance” view of the system, and instead cultivate an approach in which the system is a “transformational partner” that enables, supports, and fosters a culture of change and collaborative progress.
2. Help campuses see themselves in the work by contextualizing data and empowering local solutions within an agreed upon framework.
3. Bring colleges together to make purposeful plans and ensure adequate representation of both leadership from across key areas (e.g., Academic Affairs, Student Services, Institutional Research, IT, Finance) of the college and key actors deeper in the institution (e.g., deans and chairs).
4. Create space for honest reflection and disagreement, but lead and end with evidence, and require that conversations be anchored in evidence and data.

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