

# HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION

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## DREXEL UNIVERSITY'S KEY STRATEGIES FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

*Drexel University is a multi-campus, private, urban research university with its main campus in a poor, largely industrial part of Philadelphia. Anthony J. Drexel established the university in 1891 to provide opportunities for students from working class and immigrant backgrounds to gain qualifications and skills that would improve their social and economic status. In 2014-15, there were 26,359 students enrolled at Drexel University, 20 percent of whom were Pell Grant recipients. The 2008 incoming cohort of Pell Grant students at Drexel has a graduation rate of 54 percent.*

Initiated by the arrival of President John Fry in 2010, Drexel University focuses on five key and coordinated strategies to drive the pursuit of student success: (1) a focus on students' point of view, (2) new budgeting and financial aid policies, (3) a longstanding co-op program, (4) structures for giving faculty stronger voices, and (5) a commitment to building a local pipeline of low-income and first-generation students and to supporting the surrounding community.

### A focus on students' point of view

Drexel committed itself to approaching student success by understanding students' lived experience, which led to a number of important steps:

- Drexel formed a Student Lifecycle Management Steering Committee to look at all aspects of university life including preadmission academic assessment and help through orientation; advising; financial assistance; co-op experiences; and job search at graduation.
- The university created Drexel Central, a one-stop shop that brought all student administrative services into one location.
- Drexel redesigned on-campus accommodation to bring students of the same major to live in "learning communities" with specialized programming in the same residence hall.
- An online database, Degree Works, was unveiled to help students monitor their progress in their program of study and stay on track to graduate on time.
- First-year orientation was changed so that all freshmen move in on a single celebratory day in order to help create a sense of excitement and community. Also, during welcome week, first-year students now receive training in "how to be a student."

### New budgeting and financial aid policies

Drexel is revamping its student financial aid system to focus more on need rather than merit. In the past, financial aid was geared toward supporting students in their first year. Subsequent years of aid were strongly merit-based and linked to high academic achievement. As a result, some students experienced significant financial losses if their GPA slightly

dropped. For lower-income students, a reduction in financial aid can make the difference between dropping out and continuing on their path to a credential. Drexel's new financial aid strategy makes student retention a priority by placing a premium on need-based aid. In addition, each year, 50 Philadelphia students from low-income families receive full scholarships that cover 100 percent of their tuition, fees, and expenses.

Because Drexel is a private university with a relatively small endowment, the restructuring of student financial aid will require aggressive fundraising efforts to generate an endowment that sufficiently covers annual costs.

For this reason, Drexel is decentralizing its budgeting to enable its 15 colleges and schools to have greater incentives for revenue generation, and more control over their expenditures. Decentralized budgeting gives the colleges and schools ownership over their curricula and shifts their focus to university-wide goals like retention and graduation rates.



The change to the new budgeting model began in 2013, and will fully be implemented in 2016. In year one, the decentralized policies and procedures co-existed with the traditional centralized system. In year two, the decentralized structure took over but with a "hold harmless" provision that removes any penalties to the departments that might result from the changes. The process will go live in year three after the kinks have been worked out.

Decentralized budgets are common at many research universities. However, they raise data security issues by having to broaden departmental access to information. Also, there are risks that departments may make decisions based on their own interests rather than on what is best for students overall and for other university operations. Strategies are in place to manage these risks.

### A longstanding co-op program

Founder Anthony J. Drexel's vision to provide opportunities for students from working class and immigrant backgrounds to gain qualifications and skills that would improve their social and economic status continues to be part of Drexel's mission today. The university's practice of offering students multiple six-month work placements as part of its degree structure is one way this mission is translated into practice. Although compulsory for around 50 percent of Drexel students, over 90 percent participate in this co-op program. Most students opt to take five years to earn a bachelor's degree, and complete three six-month full-time co-op jobs over the course of the five years.

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At Drexel, co-op is far more than a simple internship. It is based on close working and teaching relationships between Drexel faculty, students, and participating organizations that stretch back almost 100 years. The program balances classroom theory with practical, hands-on experiences. Co-op contributes to student success in a variety of ways: real experiences in looking for job placements, preparing persuasive resumes, handling job interviews, learning acceptable work behaviors, and—in most cases—earning money to contribute to tuition and fees. Further, the program assures a regular pool of appropriate adjunct faculty and gives Drexel free, grounded, easily-accessible labor market data and qualitative feedback from its partners that allow the institution to modify curricula to ensure students have the necessary skills to meet current market needs.

### Structures for giving faculty stronger voices

Drexel recognizes that presidents and senior administrators change periodically. Faculty and trustees occupy the long-term roles needed to sustain strategies that focus on student success. Therefore, important leadership roles are designated to faculty and to the board of trustees.

At Drexel, the different types of faculty (i.e., tenure/tenure-track faculty, non-tenured teaching faculty, and adjunct faculty drawn in part from co-op employers) are all integrated into university-wide policy and decision making. Non-tenured teaching faculty, for example, are voting members of the faculty senate and have full access to university benefits. Treating all faculty as full partners in this endeavor contributes to student success in various ways. First, students are taught by many faculty members whose job responsibilities are primarily teaching rather than research. Second, in addition to full-time faculty, professional role models also teach students. Third, students gain an employer’s perspective when instructed by adjunct faculty who are drawn from the co-op partners. Fourth, the broader community of faculty has a strong voice on key

university committees, allowing for different elements of students’ lived experiences to be represented.

### A commitment to building a local pipeline of low-income and first-generation students and to supporting the surrounding community

Drexel understands that to increase the overall number of low-income and first-generation graduates, it must not only better support students already in the higher education pipeline, but also future postsecondary students who are from low-income backgrounds or who would be the first in their family to go to college. Accordingly, Drexel has made a long-term commitment to its local community and supports a wide array of programs at neighborhood public schools, from pre-K through high school and beyond, in order to grow the student pipeline.

Drexel also understands the potential risk of the university inadvertently gentrifying the area and pushing out existing residents. Its community strategy seeks to avoid this in a number of ways:

- First and second-year students are required to live in university-approved residence halls or apartments on or close to campus rather than driving up rents by living off campus.
- Drexel renovated property in the neighborhood to create the Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships, which offers a range of services for community members.
- The university established the Lindy Center for Civic Engagement to bring the community and its local concerns together with students, faculty and staff.
- The Drexel Community Scholars leadership program offers students the opportunity to be liaisons with community partners.
- Drexel is developing “buy local, hire local” policies and practices.

While each of these efforts individually contributes to student—and community—success, combining them into a cohesive and comprehensive strategy is what makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts.



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