

# A Better Formula for Student Success

By Ronald M. Berkman

In high school, Amber Kuehn sustained a serious ballet injury that required surgery and extensive physical therapy. After beating the odds and making a full recovery, she came to Cleveland State University (CSU) in Ohio, a first-generation college student who aspired to become a physical therapist herself. Nobody said it would be easy. Nonetheless, Amber plowed ahead with her pre-PT studies, including a battery of challenging anatomy and biology courses. She was determined to succeed.

*Student success:* It's the mantra du jour in higher education. But merely repeating buzzwords over and over won't make them a reality. If we really want students to succeed, we must provide an "operating system" that maximizes the chance to be successful.

At CSU, we have attempted to build this system by making dramatic changes in how students are advised, while also creating better pathways to optimize degree completion, including incentives that reward students. We know the college experience can be fraught with potential cracks to fall through, especially for nontraditional students or first-generation students, who are far more likely than their peers to drop out.

This operating system for student success helped Amber handily beat the odds again. Throughout her tenure at CSU she was supported by a suite of programs that help students stay on track to graduation. These include:

- *Multi-term registration*, which allows students to plan coursework for an entire academic year at once, rather than by semester, facilitating access to required courses;
- *Demand-driven enrollment*, which enables students to request spots in courses at full capacity via online waitlists and makes it possible for departments to open additional class sections to meet demand; and
- *An adjusted tuition band*, which lets students take up to 18 credit hours per semester at the same cost as 12 credit hours.

Amber also qualified for CSU's Graduation Incentive Plan. It provided a 2 percent tuition rebate and a \$200 book stipend to students who complete 30 credit hours per academic year in good academic standing.

Amber further benefited from intensive academic advising as well as tutoring through our TRIO program, which provides special assistance for first-generation students and low-income students. She went on to become a tutor herself, helping other students navigate those tricky anatomy and biology courses.

Our student success initiatives have strengthened the safety net at CSU. We're seeing steady increases in retention and graduation rates, while simultaneously helping students save time and money en route to earning their degrees.

Just ask Amber. She completed her undergraduate career in three and a half years – ahead of schedule. At CSU's 2016 fall commencement, she was the valedictorian of our College of Sciences and Health Professions, graduating summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Science in Health Sciences.

When Amber received her diploma, I was so proud to shake her hand. She'll soon start graduate school in pursuit of a doctor of physical therapy degree. She ultimately hopes to work with older adults. I have no doubt Amber will realize her aspirations. Nothing breeds success like success. **P**

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*Ronald M. Berkman is president of Cleveland State University, a winner of AASCU's Excellence and Innovation Award for Student Success and College*