Given the range of issues that cross a university president’s desk and the high-powered stakeholders presidents connect with, one might wonder where students fit in that heady mix. Busy presidents could merely mention students here and there, then cross that task off their list.

But most presidents don’t stop there. Many leaders will be quick to tell you that students are their raison d’être—the essence of why they come to work every day. And they back that talk with action, engaging deeply in the hard work of actively serving students. In fact, it can be argued that on many campuses, the president is the students’ strongest advocate.

Presidents fulfill this role via different channels, using a range of tools. The work might take the form of envisioning and then pushing for academic structures, policies, programs and practices that support and nurture students. Presidents might advocate for policies that help students at state and national levels. And then there is the personal commitment to simply get to know students and make a point of interacting with them and understanding their concerns.

### Advancing a Vision

Presidential support for students begins with the leader’s ideas and ideals for what the institution should accomplish on behalf of those key stakeholders. “A president has the responsibility to have a vision for what they want to see for their campus, and to be able to share that vision, and entreat other people to join you,” says Mary Evans Sias, president of Kentucky State University. “Without that, people are left in isolated silos, without seeing the common threads.” For Sias, student success is the most important common thread of all—and it’s up to the president to try to get faculty and staff to share that perspective.

Mary Cullinan, president of Southern Oregon University, views part of her responsibility as
building everyone who works on campus, regardless of their job, to understand the role they play in helping students succeed. Accordingly, she does whatever she can to help everyone at SOU to focus on one salient question: “From the first day a prospective student steps on campus, are we providing that student with a compelling vision of how Southern Oregon University is going to commit to their success?”

As president, Cullinan says, “I have the opportunity and challenge to guide these processes and help us more clearly define ourselves as an institution focused on student success.” To that end, for example, she led a process to create a student-focused mission statement and set of university commitments. She nurtures efforts to engage more students in research and creative pursuits. Each year, she uses some of her office’s discretionary funding to create mini-grants for faculty who collaborate with students. She also empowers students to lead campus activities in sustainability.

F. King Alexander, president of California State University, Long Beach, says that the president can establish the foundation and set the tempo for how a university should support students, “so it’s not just one of 50 things you’re doing, but it becomes a primary motivating factor in everybody’s job, from the grounds crew to the senior faculty.” Alexander’s convocation address for the fall term, for example, included 10 minutes focused on “the significance of making sure our students have pathways to success to graduate,” he says. He also saw to it that banners were placed across the CSULB campus proclaiming, “Graduation Starts Today”—a daily reminder for all about the institutions’ core goal.

### Organizing for Students

Presidents also use the power of their office to shape institutional structures, systems, policies and procedures that focus institutional energies on students. Jones, for example, says that “if you want the institution to value student service, you have to show that you value student service and success. And you have to make good on that, both organizationally—by creating structures that are premised on delivery of high-quality service—and by rewarding people who do it. The money has to go where the values are.”

Jones was instrumental in an effort three years ago to reorganize A&M Commerce’s student affairs area. The school created a new division of student access and success, Jones says, in part to bridge the traditional gulf between student affairs and academic affairs.

To help establish expectations for student service, A&M Commerce put in place “specific metrics and expectations for performance,” Jones says. “We want to see persistence rates go up. We want to see graduation rates go up. We want to tie that to actual practices. And that’s basically how the performance of the entire division, as well as the individuals within it, is measured.”

Jones says he often tells campus audiences that “students...
are the reason we are here, that we are not here just to teach at them, but we are here to help them learn.” The new divisional structures reflect those commitments, he says, and the metrics help tell what’s working and what needs work in terms of serving students.

Sias is pursuing a similar tack at Kentucky State. “We just added a new position in our organizational structure, vice president of student enrollment and student success,” she says. “We have devoted ourselves to change our culture on campus so that we become a campus with a culture of completion. What that means is that there should be an expectation among faculty and staff and others that we’re doing everything we possibly can to get students through to graduation. That’s the sign of success.”

Driving Bold Change

Because of the power vested in their office, presidents are uniquely positioned to drive bold, campus-wide innovations. This year, for example, CSULB launched a residential college system, akin to Oxford or Cambridge, designed to enrich the student experience. The initiative grew out of strategic planning led by the president’s office. The rationale, Alexander explains, is that from their first day of classes, students become not just part of CSULB, but also have a home in an academic college that functions as a living and learning community.

Presidential authority also enables leaders to move relatively fast to help establish programs to address identified needs. Seeking new strategies to ensure college completion, for example, Sias appointed a task force empowered to look broadly at “the rules and regulations that were impeding student success,” she says. Recognizing that some majors had bloated to more than 140 credit hours required for graduation, for example, the task force recommended ways to rein that in while creating opportunities for students to pursue more depth in their majors through upper-division courses.

The task force is part of a series of reforms—including better student advising and tutoring, and the creation of living/learning communities in dorms—that were sparked by what Sias calls “a conscious decision” on her part that “this is what we have to do in order to improve our retention and graduation rates and, more importantly, the overall success of our students.”

Cullinan is another leader who has tackled change on behalf of students on a large scale. “With the assistance of vice presidents and many others,” she says, “I led a process to create an enrollment services center, a one-stop center for students that brought together student-support offices that had been dispersed across campus, and cross-trained staff to greatly improve students’ experiences as they registered and needed assistance during the year.”

Going forward, Cullinan says, “we need to think through everything we do to help keep the university affordable, despite huge state disinvestment, and enable students to be successful—helping them acquire the knowledge and skills they need in a changing world and helping them graduate and be successful after graduation.” For example, she says, SOU plans “a significant overhaul of the way we handle financial aid to greatly increase the number of student jobs on campus. Jobs on campus help retain students while enabling faculty and staff to provide guidance and mentoring that will be invaluable to student workers.” SOU is also looking at ways to rethink general education and majors to enhance multidisciplinary skills and help move students more quickly to graduation.

Using the Bully Pulpit

Another dimension of the president’s role in advancing student success is to capitalize on the authority inherent in the president’s mantle to use that office as a bully pulpit to speak out for students. Moreover, in an era when student access to college, affordability of higher education, and completion of college degrees are of paramount importance, the president’s role as a voice for students has never been more central or critical.
In part, that role plays out at home. “Don’t be afraid to become an advocate for the student and for student success on your campus,” Sias counsels. “Once you have become that advocate, other people will join you.”

In addition, of course, many presidents use their bully pulpit off campus. Typical of many presidents with a bent for public policy, Dene Kay Thomas, president of Fort Lewis College in Colorado, works regionally and nationally to advocate for student-supportive legislation. As leader of a university where 23 percent of the students are Native American, for example, she has been working with Senator Michael F. Bennet and Representative Scott Tipton to advance the Native American Indian Education Act, which would offer tuition relief to Native American students.

A strong advocate for access to higher education, Alexander recently urged President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to consider three variables together—total students graduated, percentage of students graduated, and number of Pell-eligible students graduated—as a critical benchmark of a university’s record in student success.

The Personal Touch

Part of the presidential work of walking the walk in advancing student success is the time-consuming but important exercise of interacting personally with students. For example, in August, on the first day of classes, Thomas spent the better part of her morning visiting academic buildings and sharing coffee and doughnuts with students.

Thomas makes a point of creating events where she can mingle with students, and attends as many campus activities as possible. She maintains an open-door policy for student visits to her office. And she keeps in touch with students via social media. “I take every chance I can to speak to students, to inspire them, to let them know the importance of what they’re doing as students and how meaningful that is,” Thomas says.

To ensure input from the student perspective, Thomas even created a position on her presidential cabinet for the leader of the student senate. She also uses formal complaints from students as learning opportunities for her staff—she won’t overrule staff decisions unless there is a truly compelling reason, but she uses such occasions to raise issues for staff discussion.

Creating systems to ensure regular contact with students is important for a president, Thomas says. At the same time, though, a president needs to “have heart,” she says. “Inspire. Be the cheerleader. You have to care deeply, and you have to show that you care.”

Betz puts it this way: “I think the best way to support student development is to let students know that you may be the president, but you’re also an educator and a person, and perhaps a father or mother, and that you have a direct, personal, passionate interest in what happens to them.”

“Talk to your students,” Sias advises. “Don’t assume that you know what will be best for them, just because the research says it. Get with them. Have focus groups with them. Find out what their issues are.”

For many presidents, helping students succeed is the touchstone that helps leaders measure all that they do. “We’re not building Buicks here. We’re building the future,” Betz says. “The future is in the hearts and minds of these really bright students with a variety of choices about what pathways they’re going to take. That’s the reason why we come here in the morning.”

Tools for Advancing Student Success

Presidents use many tools to position their universities to ensure student success, including these specific strategies.

Budgeting. As the driver of the institutional budget, a president can make sure that efforts to support students get top priority for funding.

Data. Facts and figures can give presidents information to help them drive change on behalf of students. “You need data to clearly show you where your strengths and weaknesses are,” Alexander says. He says that data are also critical in understanding where university logjams exist—“whether you have enough labs, whether you have enough classes in the areas that you require for graduation, and whether you are overburdening students in certain majors.” CSULB uses data, for example, to learn which degree-critical sections are full, and then adds sections to help students complete their requirements.

Starring students. Presidents can underscore the central importance of students by giving them a prominent role in campus events.

Student services. Another tool for student success is improving the way the university delivers basic student services. To help students stay enrolled and on track for graduation, Sias says, “customer service is critical. We have to improve how we service our students, and how fast we get back to them.”

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