



Strategies Colleges Can Use to Support Student Navigation

Insights from the CTE CoLab

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This brief focuses on how colleges participating in the Career and Technical Education CoLab (CTE CoLab) Community of Practice are implementing student navigation strategies to improve outcomes for students of color. The CTE CoLab aims to reduce disparities in academic and career outcomes for historically marginalized students—especially students who are Black, Latinx, or Indigenous—enrolled in online and hybrid postsecondary CTE programs. This publication describes insights from roundtables conducted with participating CTE CoLab college teams, colleges' equity action plans, and related research focused on the topic of student navigation to surface knowledge for the field and identify ways to further support the implementation of equity-centered student navigation strategies.

The CTE CoLab is a research-informed community of practice led by the Urban Institute which brings together a group of community colleges with the intent to change programs and institutions to improve education and employment outcomes for students of color.¹ The purpose of the CTE CoLab is to build knowledge at the intersection of CTE programs and institutions, racial equity, and online and hybrid programs. By “racial equity,” we mean fair treatment and intentional strategies that eliminate disparities for students of color and ideally result in equal academic and career outcomes for all students. Through the work of the CTE CoLab, Urban is documenting insights from colleges' work to advance racial equity, including the strategies each college is using to support student navigation.

In February and May of 2024, the Urban Institute convened two CTE CoLab virtual roundtables to uplift practitioner expertise and experiences related to student navigation. The virtual roundtables provided an opportunity for college staff to connect with each other and exchange ideas for advancing racial equity and included practitioners from each of the four participating colleges and programs:

- Chippewa Valley Technical College – Eau Claire, Wisconsin
 - » Information Technology-Software Developer program
- Diablo Valley College – Pleasant Hill, California
 - » Art Digital Media program
- Wake Technical Community College – Raleigh, North Carolina
 - » Network Management program
- WSU Tech – Wichita, Kansas
 - » Machining Technology and Nursing programs

This brief primarily draws insights from the roundtables, each college’s equity action plan,² which identifies goals and strategies for advancing racial equity at the program and institution level aligned with the needs of their college, and related research literature. This literature includes the Urban Institute’s recently published resource reviews on culturally sensitive research, mentoring, and orientation.³ College staff also provided additional context for their student navigation strategies during an in-person CTE CoLab convening in October 2024 and had the opportunity to review the examples featured in this brief. Practitioners and policymakers can learn from this knowledge and experience from the field to consider potential strategies to address student needs and improve outcomes for students of color and other historically marginalized groups. Below are key takeaways for implementing student navigation strategies with equity in mind.

Key Takeaways

- Navigation supports are the actions college staff take to help students navigate their college experience, persist, and succeed in college. Examples include advising, mentoring, orientation programming and other approaches that provide access and connections to support services useful for getting ahead.
- Effective student navigation interventions not only support persistence, but build students’ social capital, strengthening connections to resources and professional networks, and increasing the likelihood of success for students of color and other historically marginalized students and underrepresented learners.
- Equity-centered student navigation strategies involve: 1) using data to identify student needs, 2) providing multiple avenues to connect students to support services, and 3) leveraging

institutional capacity (e.g., existing initiatives) to improve navigation and the delivery of services to students who are most impacted by systemic barriers.

- Examples of navigation strategies from CTE CoLab colleges include surveying students to understand their support needs, redesigning orientation programs, peer-to-peer tutoring, and adjunct faculty professional development.
- During the roundtables, college staff reflected on challenges and opportunities to making transformational change in their work to support student navigation—lasting change that shifts organizational culture, operations, structures, and values. Opportunities included finding partners within the institution to serve as collaborators and allies in equity work aimed at improving student outcomes.
- To further support the implementation of student navigation strategies focused on equity, colleges can continue to benchmark progress toward their equity goals over time and involve students in the interpretation of data and adaptations to programs.
- Colleges can also find ways to improve the existing infrastructure and processes at their institution to support student navigation. This includes embedding strategies into ongoing student success initiatives to leverage institutional capacity to improve the delivery of services to students.

Background

Student Navigation Supports as a Strategy to Advance Equity

Through their work in the CTE CoLab, colleges are focusing on specific actionable strategies to improve racial equity within their CTE programs and across their institutions. These strategies include student navigation interventions that help students navigate to the right supports and determine whether existing supports are in place to help them achieve their goals. Effective interventions support students to succeed and persist in college, build students' resources and professional networks, and increase the likelihood of success for students of color and other underrepresented learners.^{4,5}

Increasing equitable results for students of color is important because students enter college with different sets of resources available to them. This is a result of structural racism, where students of color have experienced less access to opportunity and upward mobility, making it more difficult to secure quality education, jobs, housing, health care, and equal treatment in the criminal legal system.⁶ This inequality can impact educational and professional trajectories for generations, affecting the types of relationships and networking opportunities available to historically marginalized students, learners and workers (Brown 2020). Colleges can help address some of the barriers students of color face by thoughtfully designing student navigation strategies and support services that help students persist within academic and career pathways (Petrov and D'Elia 2024).⁷

Defining Student Navigation

This brief uses a broad definition of student navigation, referring to the actions college staff are taking to help students of color and other historically marginalized students navigate their college experience. Staff involved in navigation may include advisors, mentors, navigators, job developers, or instructors.

To center student navigation strategies on equity:

- **use data to identify student navigation needs**, whether academic, basic needs, or job- and career-focused;
- **provide navigation services** via advising, mentorship, orientation, or other strategies that connect students with support services, either within the college or with external partners such as community-based organizations; and
- **consider the institutional capacity needed for effective navigation** to improve training and capacity for faculty and the delivery of services to students.

Effective strategies for student navigation offer support that is tailored to the needs of students. Equity-centered student navigation strategies can help students more effectively navigate systemic barriers and help them build social capital, which refers to the strength of an individual’s social network and community (Chetty et al. 2022). Educational institutions have a unique opportunity to support students’ social capital development (see box 1). Chetty et al. (2022) distinguish social capital useful for “getting by” (surviving or coping) from social capital useful for “getting ahead” (opportunity enhancement or upward mobility). In the context of student navigation, social capital that is useful for getting ahead is of particular interest.

BOX 1

What is Social Capital?

Social capital consists of the resources embedded in a person’s social networks and relationships. Social capital can be characterized by the following:

- level of trust and reciprocity
- size of social network (number of connections)
- number of networks
- strength of relationships
- type of relationships

Each of these dimensions play a role in how social capital can impact an individual. For example, when people with low and high socioeconomic status connect, this economic connectedness becomes a strong predictor of upward mobility (Chetty et al. 2022). These dimensions of social capital can have varying impacts on educational outcomes as well, depending on who the connections are with (Mishra 2020).

CTE CoLab Student Navigation Strategies

The two virtual roundtable discussions with CTE CoLab college practitioners surfaced different ways colleges are supporting student navigation to achieve their racial equity goals. A focus throughout the discussions was how the colleges are making sure strategies are designed to support students of color and how they are seeking to affect broader institutional change.

In this section, after first describing how colleges in the CTE CoLab use data to provide insight into students' needs, we describe some of the different student navigation strategies that colleges are implementing or considering to support student navigation. These strategies include mentoring, advising, career and networking opportunities, and other supports such as peer tutoring. This information comes from college equity action plans, insights shared during the roundtables, and context provided by the colleges who reviewed the examples provided in this brief.

Using Data to Understand Students' Needs

Colleges in the CTE CoLab are working in partnership with the Urban Institute research team to expand data collection and use for the purpose of meeting the goals outlined in their equity action plans. This includes identifying and establishing benchmarks for closing academic outcome gaps in completion and retention observed in student administrative data as well as engaging students directly through surveys. In the virtual roundtables, colleges reflected on using surveys to understand what their students' needs are, how well student navigation strategies are working, and how to improve them.

"I know one of the things we look to implement [during the new student orientation] is a basic needs survey to be proactive in assessing what the students' needs might be at the beginning of the semester ... we want to do a better job of knowing what we need to promote and emphasize in the beginning [of the term] for our students and making sure that we're connecting that information to the right programs [and] to the right individuals."

—WSU tech staff

Diablo Valley College is developing a new student orientation that prioritizes understanding student needs so that staff can better connect students to resources, counseling, and basic needs support. One staff member noted, "part of the student orientation that we're really excited about is that it'll create a steady data stream and give feedback to the program. This [orientation survey] would [inform] who our students are that are entering these programs, what they need when they enter, and what would be helpful as they move forward in their degree." The goal is that if a student identifies a

need early on as part of an orientation survey, they can immediately be connected to a counselor or resources. Surveying students as part of new student orientation also provides program staff immediate information on the current needs of the student population, which may change semester to semester.

Chippewa Valley Technical College is also administering surveys to track student awareness of resources and inform the design of their orientation program for the IT-software developer program. Understanding student needs through academic data and surveys is an important step in the process of providing student navigation support (see box 2). WSU Tech is also considering ways to understand their students better through implementation of a basic needs survey during orientation.

BOX 2

Exploring Culturally Sensitive Research in the Postsecondary CTE Context

As college staff design their student navigation strategies and use focus groups, surveys, and interviews to better understand student needs, one important consideration is implementing research methods that are culturally sensitive, meaning approaches that identify and involve affected communities in the process of designing and implementing the research. Key principles for conducting culturally sensitive research include engaging students at every research stage, from defining the research questions, to designing data collection instruments, to analyzing the data. To learn more, see Payne et al. 2024.

Source: Julia Payne, Theresa Anderson, Amanda Briggs, Shayne Spaulding, and Hailey D'Elia, "Conducting Culturally Sensitive Research in Postsecondary Career and Technical Education Contexts: A Resource Review by the CTE CoLab," (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2024), https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Conducting_Culturally_Sensitive_Research_in_Postsecondary_Career_and_Technical_Education_Contexts_A_Resource_Review_by_the_CTE_CoLab.pdf.

Orientation as a Student Navigation Support

Effective student orientations can help to raise student grades, improve retention, and increase students' confidence in navigating their online courses (D'Elia et al. 2024). Orientation has also been shown to be a beneficial tool for acclimating first-year students to their college experience and for connecting students to supports that may have previously been inaccessible to students of color. Three colleges participating in the CTE CoLab are focusing on orientation to improve outcomes for students of color within their programs and across their colleges:

- **Chippewa Valley Technical College** is developing an online asynchronous orientation for their online IT-Software developer program with the goal of providing students with supports earlier than midway through the courses through the early alert system. Identifying students' needs earlier is important, especially when courses are only eight weeks long compared to a 16-week semester course.
- **Diablo Valley College** is building additional infrastructure around their Art Digital Media program orientation to ensure that clear degree information is shared with the students

upfront. Diablo Valley College staff noted that they are using the orientation experience to make adjustments and tailor programming to fit the needs of their students. They engaged student interns to pilot the orientation program, give feedback, and help inform the design of the orientation.

- **WSU Tech** is working on scaling a new student orientation across the college. The new student orientation will share information about supports such as food pantry resources, mental health services, how to do advising, and anything else they might need at the beginning of a student’s journey at the institution. One staff member mentioned that exposing students to everything the college offers at the beginning of their college experience is important because it shows what resources and additional supports are available to assist students and is an ideal moment to bring it to their attention. College staff will also continue to provide information to students with additional orientation modules throughout the semester.

A staff member at Diablo Valley College in the Art Digital Media program noted that the orientation was an important place to connect students to the program and make sure they are being reached in an online context. The college has many support services and internship opportunities available to students on campus. However, students are not always aware and connected to the resources. Students in the Art Digital Media program are often working, juggling other responsibilities, and taking courses asynchronously. College staff wanted an orientation that is still able to reach their students asynchronously and connect them with appropriate resources and support while increasing their social capital. The program also will include an assessment component, to understand how well they are reaching students with information about resources available to them.

Diablo Valley College is also using orientation to increase connections between students and instructors. They are incorporating into their learning management system a series of questions that ask the students how they want to be seen by their instructors, which in turn helps the instructors get a “human picture” of who is in the courses. One example of a question they ask is: “How would you like your professors to see you and what would you like them to know about who you are as a student?” Staff added that, “They are very simple questions, but they elicit the most fascinating answers.” By improving relationships between students and instructors, college staff hope that students have an increased sense of belonging and instructors have a better understanding of their students, making them better positioned to help students meet their academic and personal goals.

“[Orientation is] an opportunity to learn who our students are [and] a space for them to share [their] stories ... As they’re taking the orientation, they articulate their needs in real time so we can make adjustments or create programming that better suits who they are and what they want.”

—Diablo Valley College staff

Orientation as a student navigation strategy also presents challenges, such as how to encourage attendance. One college staff member noted that previously when their college had offered optional orientations, the students who were likely already more comfortable navigating college were the most likely to attend, so the orientation was not reaching the students who might have benefited from the orientation the most. CoLab college staff shared ways they are encouraging attendance and ensuring that the content of the orientations covers what is most important for student success. For example, WSU Tech is opting to gamify its in-person, institution-wide orientation. Students will be able to earn points toward prizes. They plan to hold multiple events throughout the semester to keep students engaged. Diablo Valley College is considering offering extra credit in classes in exchange for orientation attendance.

The colleges are also incorporating student feedback into the design of their orientation programs to improve them over time (see box 3). For example, WSU Tech conducted focus groups during the pilot version of their institution-wide student orientation. Staff reported that the focus groups were helpful because, “[Students] were very outspoken about what they didn’t like about the orientation, so we were able to tweak some of things for the fall semester.” They plan to conduct more focus groups as more students attend to continue to improve the orientation. As noted above, Diablo Valley College has been working with a group of student interns to ensure that student voice is incorporated into the design of their orientation program.

BOX 3

Postsecondary Orientation Practices and Equity Considerations

When designed with student needs in mind, orientations can help raise student grades and retention. It is important to design orientations so that they reflect the diversity of the student body and so that content is culturally responsive. Students need to see themselves reflected in the content so that they feel it is applicable to them. Incorporating student feedback for continuous improvement is an important consideration for practitioners designing orientations.

Source: Hailey D’Elia, Shayne Spaulding, Amanda Briggs, Theresa Anderson, and Julia Payne, “Postsecondary Orientation Practices and Equity Considerations: A Resource Review by the CTE CoLab,” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2024), https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/Postsecondary_Orientation_Practices_and_Equity_Considerations_A_Resource_Review_by_the_CTE_CoLab.pdf.

Colleges also focused on engaging faculty in the development of their orientation, to help generate connections between faculty and students. Diablo Valley College suggested having faculty create “meet the professors” videos so that students can find professors in advance of the classes. College staff also suggested engaging faculty where they have expertise to help create the orientation: for example, they had a faculty member with expertise in digital media and user design build their online orientation. WSU Tech held group discussions and meetings with faculty and staff on an orientation committee who informed the development of the pilot orientation with instructors to understand how they felt the orientations had gone, which informed their planning for the scaled school-wide new student orientation.

“Our underlying assumption is that students of color may face unique challenges due to historical inequities, institutional systemic barriers, and lack of connection with the campus community.”

—WSU Tech staff

Supporting Student Navigation through Advising, Mentoring, and Tutoring

Many other student navigation touch points can be used as opportunities to share resources, provide academic supports, and improve networking opportunities. These strategies—advising, mentoring, and tutoring—help students build connections with others and can support the development of social capital that supports career advancement and economic mobility. One staff member at Diablo Valley College highlighted the opportunity to reach students through advising, suggesting an approach where advisors go through a checklist of available resources and emphasize opportunities to connect with financial aid and instructors. Wake Technical Community College is working to implement a peer tutoring program for their IT program, with a focus on supporting students of color. To make sure that the tutoring program is high quality, Wake Tech’s strategy includes training and paying tutors.

WSU Tech is surveying nursing students to understand their interest and need for a mentorship program, and to understand student preferences about the frequency of meeting with mentors. Prior research has documented the promise of mentoring as an equity-centered student navigation strategy (box 4). Student navigation strategies can be both academic- and career-focused, and provide the additional benefit of expanding students’ networks and social or professional connections. For example, WSU Tech is also planning a lecture series of machining industry professionals that will provide networking opportunities to students.

BOX 4

Mentorship as a Navigation Strategy to Advance Equity

Mentorship is a promising student navigation strategy. There are various kinds of mentorship models, from peer-to-peer, faculty to student, and industry professional to peer mentorship structures. Mentorships may be structured differently based on the provision of academic, career, or social support. Research has documented the promise of mentorship, including studies that have found higher grade point averages, persistence, and degree completion rates among college students participating in mentorship programs (Fox et al. 2020; Bettinger and Baker 2011; Bordes-Edgar et al. 2011; Campbell and Campbell 2007; Crisp 2011). From an equity standpoint, peer-to-peer mentoring programs can be especially important for students of color navigating the college experience at predominantly white institutions (Knepler et al. 2020).

Source: Hailey D’Elia, Amanda Briggs, Theresa Anderson, Julia Payne, and Shayne Spaulding, “How Postsecondary Mentorship Programs Can Advance Equity: A Resource Review by the CTE CoLab,” (Washington DC: Urban Institute, 2024), https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/How_Postsecondary_Mentorship_Programs_Can_Advance_Equity_A_Resource_Review_by_the_CTE_CoLab.pdf.

Institutional Supports for Student Navigation

A key dimension of student navigation is considering the professional development for staff that is needed for effective implementation, and available institutional capacity to improve the delivery of services to students. This includes the necessary buy-ins to move the work forward and other points of leverage to support institutional change.

Leverage Points to Affect Institutional Change

The virtual roundtables featured discussion on how colleges are trying to affect broader institutional change in their work to provide student navigation supports, and the assets they are drawing on at their colleges to support students navigating their college experience. College staff shared observations on the challenges and approaches to affect transformational change, or change that shifts organizational culture, operations, structures, and values (Curren et al. 2016). One college staff member observed that it is hard to implement change when it requires the disruption of several institutional norms (especially norms that may not be the most equitable). It can be challenging to impact institutional change in a short time frame (Glassman et al. 2022).

Strategies that CTE CoLab college staff offered around transformational change included finding allies and engaging partners across the institution in ongoing equity initiatives. One college team member said that an important step to transformational change is to understand who is already doing related work and where it is being done, because “there were different conversations that were happening, but we weren’t having them together.” This college leveraged strategies in alignment with ongoing student success initiatives that already had institutional backing and leadership support to move their institutional equity goals forward. College staff can also use their own social capital by leveraging existing relationships (for example, with college administrators) to effect change at their institutions.

One CTE CoLab college coach shared that it is important for college staff to work within their “spheres of influence.” The “spheres of influence” concept encourages individuals to understand situations through the lens of what is within their control, what is influenceable, and what is outside of their control and to prioritize acting on items within their control and influence. Ideally, this helps people recognize where they have the biggest opportunity for impact, and to avoid burnout when engaging in challenging work.^{8,9} College staff can also continue to identify ways to share power with students as partners in programmatic change and center student voices in the process. This type of power sharing can increase student trust in the faculty and institution, expand students’ spheres of influence, and increase their social capital by improving connections to staff and the college.

The college coach noted that one action within faculty’s “sphere of influence” is to name the root causes of equity issues, because bringing those to light is an important step toward larger institutional change.

“Sometimes your work is surfacing that these [equity] issues exist ... you may not be in a position, or there may not be political will within your agency to actually change an issue. Sometimes your responsibility, though, is to surface [the issues], recognizing, even though it might not be able to change, you are doing your part in surfacing how this is contributing to larger issues.”

—CTE CoLab coaching staff

Professional Development Needs

In addition to working to affect institutional change, another key dimension of effective navigation is providing faculty appropriate professional development support. Faculty are an important part of the student experience, and they work in partnership with other campus staff to provide student navigation supports. It is important that instructors—many of whom are adjuncts—are aware of the navigation supports available to students, including equity-centered navigation approaches. This is supported by higher education literature (CCRC 2019; Kezar 2012)¹⁰ and research from the CoLab, including an instructor survey that found that regular instructors were slightly more likely to be aware of student support resources than their adjunct colleagues (Payne et al. 2023). Due to the number of adjunct faculty, focusing on supporting their professional development specifically may help more instructors connect students with student navigation supports.

Diablo Valley College is focusing on supporting adjunct faculty for their institution-wide equity goal. The process of identifying this goal in their action plan started with adjunct faculty focus groups to understand how these instructors are supporting students. From these focus groups, they learned that adjunct faculty face many barriers that make it difficult to support their students. As a result of these findings, college staff are revising the adjunct onboarding process to ensure that adjuncts have clearer information on college resources available to students (including information about basic needs, technology support, and mental health counseling) and more information about the student body to help adjuncts feel connected to the college themselves. Adjuncts will also be informed about equity practices including examples of equity-based syllabi and details about the college’s equity plans. This will be part of the onboarding process, with the goal of transforming experiences for students of color by ensuring that there is more consistent commitment to equity from all the instructors in their programs. Diablo Valley College staff explained the emphasis on adjunct faculty as an important way to support their institutional goals.

“If we’re not informing [adjunct faculty] adequately, then how can we expect equity work to be happening at the student-level, supporting our students? So that’s one way we’re considering [equity work] as we’re doing focus groups on our adjuncts, we can capture that data and start to make adjustments to ensure that we are appropriately educating the new faculty members coming on to our campus.”

—Diablo Valley College staff

Diablo Valley College staff also noted that adjunct faculty expressed frustration around compensation, drawing a parallel between the equity issues and systemic barriers that create challenges around balancing life and work that both adjunct faculty and students face.

Conclusion

For practitioners interested in implementing student navigation strategies focused on equity, several lessons can be drawn from this work. This includes the importance of using data to identify student needs, collecting feedback on whether those needs are being met, and connecting students to support services useful for getting ahead. College staff can also map out their spheres of influence and act on items within their control. In addition, leveraging ongoing student success initiatives can be a helpful way for college staff to integrate student navigation strategies into existing institutional priorities. This can help colleges leverage institutional capacity and college leadership support to improve the delivery of navigation services for students. Equally as important, college staff can ensure they are creating opportunities for students to increase their social capital, given its role in supporting social and economic mobility and helping students navigate their education and careers.

Notes

- ¹ “Career and Technical Education CoLab: About,” Urban Institute, accessed October 31, 2024, <https://ctecolab.org>.
- ² For examples of equity action plans, see “Advancing Racial Equity in Hybrid and Online Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs: A Summary of Equity Action Plans in the CTE CoLab Initiative,” which captures the work of a previous cohort, which ran from June 2021 to April 2023. It can be found at the CTE CoLab website, <https://ctecolab.org>.
- ³ Hailey D’Elia, Julia Payne, Amanda Briggs, Shayne Spaulding, and Theresa Anderson, “Resource Reviews by the CTE CoLab,” August 1, 2024, Urban Institute, <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/resource-reviews-cte-colab>.
- ⁴ James Benson and Felicia Sanders, “Information and Advising: Identifying Effective Strategies that Help Students Navigate Postsecondary Education.” Inside IES Research: Notes from NCER and NCSER (blog), Institute of Education Sciences, November 8, 2021, <https://ies.ed.gov/blogs/research/post/information-and-advising-identifying-effective-strategies-that-help-students-navigate-postsecondary-education>.
- ⁵ “Practice Guide: Effective Advising for Postsecondary Students,” IES What Works Clearinghouse, October 2021, <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/28>.
- ⁶ Theresa Anderson and Shayne Spaulding, “Promoting Racial and Ethnic Equity in Online Career and Technical Education Programs Will Support an Equitable Recovery from COVID-19,” Urban Wire (blog), Urban Institute, March 15, 2021, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/promoting-racial-and-ethnic-equity-online-career-and-technical-education-programs-will-support-equitable-recovery-covid-19>.
- ⁷ Alexa Wesley Chamberlain and Amelia Parnell, “Advising as a Strategy for Achieving Equitable Student Outcomes,” MDRC, April 2022, <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/advising-strategy-achieving-equitable-student-outcomes>.
- ⁸ For more about “spheres of influence” see “Using Sphere of Control to Build Resilience,” The Management Center, accessed November 26, 2024, <https://www.managementcenter.org/resources/using-sphere-control-build-resilience>.
- ⁹ Anna Katharina Schaffner, “Understanding the Circles of Influence, Concern, and Control,” PositivePsychology.com, July 29, 2024, <https://positivepsychology.com/circles-of-influence>.
- ¹⁰ “Engaging Adjunct Faculty in the Student Success Movement,” Community College Research Center (CCRC), accessed November 25, 2024, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/research-project/engaging-adjunct-faculty-in-the-student-success-movement.html>.

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