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NEWS STUDENT SUCCESS

Student Success Champion: Q&A With Diane Chase, University of Houston

As the new chief academic officer for both a system and its flagship university, Chase explains why student success is so meaningful, both personally and as an institutional investment.

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Considering individual student voices and experiences, as well as quantitative data, are important in building an effective student-centered institution, says Diane Chase (left), who is walking here with an honors student.

(University of Houston)

“A renowned researcher and administrator who is passionate about the success of students and faculty” is how University of Houston system chancellor Renu Khator described Diane Chase, who began her role this month as senior vice chancellor for academic affairs for the system and senior vice president for academic affairs and provost for the University of Houston. Chase’s experience and “transformational ideas ... will elevate the student experience across the UH system,” added Khator, who is also president of UH.

Chase has more than 40 years of experience in academia, including more than 20 years in leadership positions, most recently as vice president for academic innovation, student success and strategic initiatives at Claremont Graduate University in California.

In the concurrent chief academic officer roles at the UH system and UH, Chase is overseeing an annual operating budget of more than \$561 million.

As she prepared to begin her new work at the tier-one public research university, Chase shared her perspective on making investments in student success.

Q: What are some actions you have taken in your career that contributed to student success?

A: All of my academic roles have incorporated student success, whether as a faculty member teaching and mentoring students or as an academic administrator. What I have learned is that student success can sometimes be achieved through relatively small changes.

In my previous institutions, we studied courses that were bottlenecks that stopped or slowed student progress toward a degree. These included general

education courses as well as upper-division and graduate courses. We identified courses where students had lower chances of completing the course with a good grade. Program faculty then reviewed the course content and worked on course redesign, making changes in delivery and/or course assignments while keeping program outcomes the same. Course enhancements resulted in greater student success in these courses and speedier progress toward graduation.

At my past institutions (particularly UNLV), encouraging student participation in [first-year experience] programs led both to increased persistence of students into their second year and to decreased time to complete a degree.

First-year programs are not as common for graduate institutions. At Claremont Graduate University, we developed programs to help students at different points. The first-year experience program helps orient new students to campus, while success-after-coursework programs help them navigate the later part of their careers. This combined approach has helped with greater retention, completion and student satisfaction.

Other initiatives that have led to positive results are ones that encouraged full-time course enrollment (whenever possible) and engagement with campus activities. Student advising and support professionals are also a key part of the solution—and one important investment that I have promoted in my previous institutional roles.

Q: When you joined Claremont Graduate University in 2019, your vice president title included the words “student success.” What message does that send?

A: The ability to focus on student success was a big part of my decision to join Claremont Graduate University. At that point, it was not typical for an executive-level position to focus on the academic side of student success or for someone who had provost and academic affairs experience to serve in

such a role ... CGU allowed me to really focus on the student experience and the entire student journey—from the point at which a prospective student is thinking about enrolling to complete a degree through their successful graduation and becoming an alum.

Key Initial Goals for Diane Chase at the University of Houston

Moving the needle on academic metrics, such as first-year to second-year retention rate and four-year to six-year graduation rates, are Chase's top student success-related goals. Yet in her earliest days, she is working to understand the impact of current programs, including:

- [UHin4](#) four-year graduation plan
- [Houston Guided Pathway to Success](#) transfer student success program
- [Challenger Program](#) for first-generation college students
- [Exploratory Studies Program](#), which helps students identify a major
- [Cub Camp](#), a student-run club

Chase also values recognizing individual student success stories, as opposed to just tracking progress with the numbers—especially at research universities, which are creating “solutions for thorny problems ... [and serving] as partners and engines for development of the communities within which they are embedded.”

Also important to my decision to join CGU was that it allowed me to focus on graduate student success and to work with my friend and colleague President Len Jessup, who I knew was on board with a focus on student success as part of CGU's DNA.

Q: Can you describe the need to prioritize and continually invest in student success?

A: Because investing in student success benefits all parties, it is usually not difficult to make it a priority. To quote goal one of the [UH strategic plan](#):

A college education has long been a part of the American dream. Research shows college graduates earn more money, are more likely to own a home, have more joy and better health ... Society wins when everyone can attain the dream of a high-quality college education ... UH stands ready to further bridge the gap between dreams and opportunity, to graduate more students with higher grade point averages, make college more financially accessible to all and elevate the learning experience to prepare students for successful careers.

Students who complete more quickly spend less on tuition and, in state institutions, save taxpayer funding. They also can more quickly start the next phase of their careers, whatever that may be.

It is important to understand the many different student journeys, considering individual student voices and experiences as well as quantitative data, in order to build an effective student-centered institution. Now more than ever, we need to focus on bridging the gaps to help make the dream of higher education a reality.

Retaining and graduating more of the students who are admitted and enrolled ... is important to the institution's overall health and reputation. Successful and involved students become engaged alumni that help build the university's reputation and encourage even more enrollment. High retention and graduation rates make institutions more competitive than their peers. Thus, a focus on student success is solid investment.

Has your institution or department successfully expanded the reach of a student success program? Submit your story about scaling up here.