



HIGHLIGHTS

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MetLife Foundation

Best Practices in Student Retention

FOCUSING ON THE FACE OF THE FUTURE

Welcome to the special MetLife Foundation edition of *CCSSE Highlights*. Periodically, this new publication from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) will focus on the issue of **student retention**. This emphasis on retention and persistence – a critical issue for colleges nationwide – is made possible through a new project, the *MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success*. The Community College Leadership Program at The University of Texas at Austin launched the project in late 2001.

As part of the *Best Practices in Student Retention* series, colleges will receive descriptions of student retention practices that are demonstrably working for students, along with implementation strategies.

Why Focus on Student Retention?

Providing an open door, community and technical colleges have become the face of the future of higher education – and of American society. A quick look at the characteristics of community and technical colleges and their students illustrates the point:

- Community and technical colleges currently enroll 44% of all American undergraduate students and more than half of the freshmen and sophomores.
- Though community and technical colleges comprise only one-third of the higher education institutions in the country, they enroll 49% of *all* minority students in American undergraduate education.
- The older student population is the fastest growing population in community and technical colleges. The average age of community and technical college students is 29.

- Sixty four percent of community and technical college students are part-time, as compared to 22% of their counterparts in four-year institutions.

While serving as an open door into higher education, community and technical colleges also face a difficult challenge. The challenge is to design the kinds of learning experiences and support services that will engage and challenge these diverse students to complete their educational goals. Student retention, therefore, is both a prickly problem and a pressing priority. Consider, for example, these further observations:

- Students entering community and technical colleges are three to four times more likely than their peers at baccalaureate institutions to reflect the factors that put students most at risk of not attaining a degree. Those factors include delayed entry, part-time enrollment, full-time employment, financial independence, single parenthood, family dependents, and under-preparation for college.
- There is compelling evidence that community and technical college students who drop out are usually lost *early* in their collegiate experience. This argues for strong emphasis on “the front door” – that is, a focus on practices known to have a significant impact on student retention and success – including assessment and placement processes upon entry, effective academic advising, and academic “early alert” systems that bring timely attention to students who need it.
- National data on community and technical college retention is meager at best; however, there is absolutely no doubt that retention is a major issue, both for the institutions and for the public entities that support them. Over 30 states now employ some type of performance indicator system to evaluate the performance of colleges and universities and student retention is typically high on the indicator list.

The Metlife Foundation Initiative

Far too often in our responses to the challenges, the most important element – the *student voice* – is overlooked.

The *MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success* is designed to feature the student voice in a national effort to identify and recognize exemplary work in the area of student retention and persistence. The objectives of the *Initiative* are to:

- Identify, recognize and reward community and technical colleges that demonstrate exemplary performance in the area of student retention and persistence, using *CCSSE* student survey data and college retention statistics as the criteria.
- Capture and widely share proven best practices for student retention in community and technical colleges.
- Highlight the *CCSSE* student survey results by bringing data to life through students' voices on campus, in conferences, on the Web, and through other modes of communication.

MetLife Foundation Best Practice Colleges

As part of the *Initiative*, during 2002 and 2003, up to ten colleges across the country will be selected as the **MetLife Foundation Best Practice Colleges**. Each college will receive **cash awards**, up to \$10,000, in recognition of their exemplary work.

Selection of the exemplary colleges will be based on the findings from The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (*CCSSE*), which was developed to fill the significant nationwide deficit in data about student retention and learning. *CCSSE* is a new assessment tool specifically designed for technical and community colleges as a tool for benchmarking, institutional improvement, and accountability purposes.

The Community College Student Report, *CCSSE's* survey instrument, includes items explicitly designed to examine practices identified by research as important to student retention and persistence. Included, for example, are items addressing the level of student interaction with faculty and peers; the degree of academic challenge; the perceived availability and quality of financial aid, academic advising, tutoring services and child care; and so on. These items collectively will provide valuable data regarding student perceptions about the institutional services that are likely to help keep them engaged in their educational programs.

Based on survey results from community and technical colleges across the country, a national retention benchmark will be established, and it will be readily possible to identify participating community and technical colleges that stand out as high performers – the **MetLife Foundation Best Practice Colleges**.

Sharing “Best Practices” Through Students’ Eyes

The *MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success* places emphasis on featuring and hearing the voices of students. Because *CCSSE* is a survey conducted with students, eliciting their perspectives and opinions about their educational experience, the initiative will help to communicate those students' messages. The University of Texas-based project staff will work closely with the selected best practice colleges to conduct **student focus groups** and to produce **video** segments and **conference sessions** that bring life to data about the student experience.

Finally, the initiative will produce and broadly disseminate a series of **Best Practice Highlights** which describe college approaches to retention and learning that demonstrably work for students. The *Highlights*, an executive summary-style publication that will reach more than 80,000 readers in community and technical colleges across the country, will describe the high-performance colleges' approaches to student retention, along with their implementation strategies.

Participating in the MetLife Foundation Initiative

The *MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success* is an award and recognition program and is not a program of grants for which colleges can apply. Any college, however, that participates in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (*CCSSE*) is **automatically** eligible for consideration for one of the MetLife awards. To participate in *CCSSE* 2003, please visit our web site at www.ccsse.org or contact Evelyn Waiwaiole, Project Manager, *MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success* by e-mail at waiwaiole@ccsse.org or by phone at (512) 471-6807.

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