



HIGHLIGHTS

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MetLife Foundation

Best Practices in Student Retention

MetLife Foundation Honors Montgomery College

This special edition of *CCSSE Highlights* features the work of Montgomery College (MC), a 2002-2003 *MetLife Foundation Best-Practice College*. The issue provides an overview of issues that prompted MC's focus on student retention, describes key strategies implemented and shares lessons learned.

Defining the Issue: What Prompted the Focus on Student Retention

Montgomery College is a member of the five-college North Harris Montgomery Community College District in the northern suburbs of Houston. The campus was built in 1995 and in fall 2002 the college enrolled 6,395 credit students.

Since 1995, the college has listed improvement of student retention and success as one of six primary goals. Improving the success of underprepared students was the strategic theme of the district's re-affirmation of accreditation self-study with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). An unacceptable 46% success rate (success = 'C' or better) in developmental courses (1996-2000) prompted the college to target the improvement of student retention and success.

Facing the Challenge: Model Practices for Student Success

In an effort to improve student retention and success, the college implemented several new initiatives: 1) entering student questionnaire, 2) learning communities, and 3) academic support services provided at the Extended Learning Center (ELC). As a result of these initiatives, by the fall of 2001, the college improved its developmental course success rate by ten percentage points to 56 percent.

Student Questionnaire

Two years ago, Montgomery College staff recognized the limitations of bombarding students with a broad spectrum of information about all the services they might ever imagine

needing. The college adopted a communication system that would begin with the student's own perceptions of his or her specific needs and ended with the provision of specialized, individually tailored information to meet those needs.

The Liberal Arts Division of the college developed a simple questionnaire, probing students about their needs for information on academic support, financial aid, career services, student organizations, disabilities services, and personal issues. For the past three years students in developmental studies courses have filled out the questionnaire during the first week of class. Information gathered is routed to service providers on- and off-campus, who then contact students with offers of assistance. In a recent poll of 130 students to evaluate the questionnaire system, 86% said it was "most helpful" or "helpful," and 89% said they planned to pursue resources about which they were informed.

The questionnaire will be made a part of the college application process in order to (a) reach all students, not just those in developmental courses and (b) begin the process of routing information and assistance to students at an earlier point in their experience with the college.

Learning Communities

In August of 2000, Montgomery College brought retention expert Vincent Tinto to campus for a day with faculty and staff. Professor Tinto, distinguished professor at Syracuse University and author of *Leaving College*, brings years of research to substantiate his belief that learning communities work powerfully to bind students to their fellow learners and to keep students engaged with their academic programs. Faculty in both the Math and English departments had started learning communities prior to his visit, but the college became committed to pursuing them on a larger scale thereafter – especially for students in developmental education.

Course combinations offered at least once since the 2000-2001 academic year include (1) College Algebra & Composition I, (2) Pre-Algebra Math & Developmental Reading II, (3) Intermediate Algebra & Composition I, (4) US History II & Principles of Sociology and (5) Developmental Reading II & Developmental Writing II. Retention rates for these courses range from 60 to 86 percent.

The college budgets around \$30,000 per year for learning community support to cover professional development and course releases for professors, food, supplies, and extra tutoring.

By the end of 2003, the college has planned and budgeted to extend learning communities to include Principles of Accounting & Microeconomics (including a two-week trip to Italy) and US History I & Government I.

Extended Learning Center (ELC)

During the planning of the Montgomery College campus (1993-95), community college educators had a clear understanding that assigning homework and expecting students to complete it on their own does not optimize learning. On the strength of this understanding, the college founders placed academic support operations at the center of the campus in the college's most attractive building.

The mission of the ELC is to respect the individuality of every learner, to provide quality learning experiences that promote a sense of achievement and learner independence, to communicate openly and to connect with the community of learners so that persistence, retention and student success are the primary outcomes of everyday endeavors.

The ELC hosts facilitated study groups, which began in 1997 with a pilot group of students from Biology I. The two-hour per week study group focused on group dynamics and study skills, placing responsibility on students for teamwork conducive to learning. The pilot was very successful and since the 2001-2002 academic year, the program has been extended to Anatomy & Physiology I. The success of these courses with facilitated focus groups is evident in the retention rates, which range from 77 to 99 percent.

The facilitated study groups at the ELC have also been met with great enthusiasm from the students. As one Montgomery College student noted, "It has been most helpful because I was able to ask questions directly to someone who could help me. The study groups also taught me easier ways to understand things and have kept me on schedule with my studying."

The ELC also offers online and on-the-ground tutoring assistance (reading, writing, mathematics, accounting, economics, chemistry), computer services, a foreign language lab, and academic strategy seminars (test taking, time management, learning from lectures).

The Montgomery College Extended Learning Center reported 132,400 student visits during the academic year 2001-2002, up 42% from the previous year. Of 385 student success seminar evaluation forms received, 229 students indicate that they will use the strategies/information "a lot," and 150 indicate "some."

Lessons Learned

Reflecting on the work of the college, MC President Tom Butler said, "Keeping students focused on their goals is a major goal for any community college. Our faculty has done an outstanding job in this regard. Retention isn't always an easy issue to address, but through a comprehensive approach, we are making significant strides in retaining our students." The experience of Montgomery College clearly indicates that progress in this important work requires serious focus, integration of a variety of strategies, and persistence over time.

For More Information

For more information about Montgomery College visit the college's web site at <http://www.mc.nhmccd.edu/>. For specific information on the student retention efforts at MC, contact Olin Joynton, Vice President for Education Programs at olin.joynton@nhmccd.edu.

For additional information on student retention and success, consider using the following resources. For a more comprehensive list of resources, visit the CCSSE web site at www.ccsse.org.

- American Council on Education, *Access & Persistence: Findings from 10 Years of Longitudinal Research on Students*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2002.
- Tinto, V., *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition, Second Edition*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Short-term Enrollment in Postsecondary Education: Student Background and Institutional Difference in Reasons for Early Departure, 1996-98*, NCES 2003-153. Washington, DC: 2002.
- Lumina Foundation For Education, *What We Know About Access and Success in Postsecondary Education: Informing Lumina Foundation's Strategic Direction*. Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation For Education, September 2002.