



# HIGHLIGHTS

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## MetLife Foundation

*Best Practices in Student Retention*

### MetLife Foundation Honors Muskingum Area Technical College

This special edition of *CCSSE Highlights* features the work of Muskingum Area Technical College (MATC), a 2003-2004 *MetLife Foundation Best-Practice College*. This overview of MATC's retention efforts outlines factors that prompted the college to focus on student retention, briefly describes two initiatives implemented, and discusses key lessons learned.

#### Defining the Issue: What Prompted the Focus on Student Retention

Muskingum Area Technical College, located in Zanesville, Ohio, serves 1900-2000 learners annually in rural Appalachian Ohio. The college serves a population that experiences high unemployment and poverty rates. The population's average level of educational attainment is significantly lower than the level for the rest of the state and the nation.

MATC serves a population that is predominantly comprised of females from lower socioeconomic and under-educated backgrounds. Sixty percent of the students work eleven or more hours a week and 67 percent have children living at home. Seventy percent of the college's students receive financial aid. Most are first generation college attendees who have no knowledge of higher education and no role models for how to succeed in college.

In the mid-to late 1990s, MATC's retention rates were lower than national averages, and only one-fourth of the college's students were graduating within five years of their first enrollment. Additionally, each year two-thirds of incoming students were under-prepared for college-level academic coursework and required one or more developmental education courses.

### Facing the Challenge: Two Model Practices for Student Success

In response to these realities, MATC initiated several programs that have had a significant role in increasing student retention rates. Of particular interest are the college's developmental education program and orientation course.

#### Developmental Education Program

In the late 1980's, given research that documented low success rates in MATC's general studies courses, establishing a comprehensive developmental education program to increase access, success, and retention emerged as a top priority in the strategic planning process. A three-year, \$450,000 Title III grant enabled the college to initiate assessment and placement testing, intake advising, intervention counseling, developmental courses, a tutoring program, computer tutorials, and other support services provided by the *Tech Learning Center* (TLC).

To complement the developmental education initiatives and support the retention efforts, the college also broadened the scope of the intake advising and intervention counseling program, establishing the *Student Success Center*. Today there is deliberate communication and collaboration between the TLC and the Student Success Center as both departments work to support and retain students. As one student summarizes these efforts, "*It's great to have assistance every step of the way. I know the steps to enroll and know where to go for help.*"

Through the use of the Noel-Levitz Retention Management Program, high-risk students are identified and advisors often utilize developmental courses or tutoring in their prescriptions for student success. Instructors send written intervention referrals to the Success Center advisors when they are concerned about a student's attendance or academic progress, and they receive written reports after an advisor has a follow-up discussion with the student. Frequently, the advisor will recommend that the student take advantage of the free tutoring services or use the supplementary instructional materials in the TLC.

The college also employs both professional and peer tutors. The professionals tutor in math and writing. Peer tutors are assigned to work with individuals or study

groups as students make requests. The TLC staff oversees every inquiry, request, or concern with genuine respect and responsiveness. One student wrote, "*The Tech Learning Center makes me feel I am welcome and that I am an important and valuable person.*"

Keeping abreast of research studies on best practices published by the National Center for Developmental Education, continuously assessing and working to improve program outcomes, and striving to meet standards for certifications from national professional organizations have contributed to the success of MATC's developmental education program. The tutor-training program has been certified by the College Reading and Learning Association since 1994; and in spring 2003 the developmental education program achieved certification from the National Association for Developmental Education. MATC is one of just two technical colleges and among a total of eleven colleges nationally that are NADE certified.

### Orientation Course

In fall 2000, the college began offering a required orientation course as part of its increased focus on the first-year student experience. The orientation course grew out of students' comments regarding challenges and barriers they face; non-returning students' statements concerning factors that led to their withdrawal from college; and from national models. One of the main objectives for this course is for students to make early connections with their peers and faculty.

The orientation course provides a consistent manner in which all students may begin classes with procedural information and expectation guidelines for success in classes until completion. The curriculum addresses issues that are common to all new students and provides resources to assist students in problem solving and career decision making. Class activities encourage peer and faculty interaction.

Student feedback is obtained through a survey that is specific to the orientation course. Through this course undecided students are identified and guided to the Student Success Center which provides many resources to assist in career selection.

### Evidence of Effectiveness

The initiatives at MATC have created a climate that is generating student success. The following data demonstrate the effectiveness of the combined retention strategies that have been implemented at the college.

- Enhanced efforts in the developmental education program have resulted in an overall student success rate of 75% in general education courses, compared to

the previous rate of 50% success for those students taking one or more developmental education courses.

- Twenty percent of the students taking developmental education courses who completed their degrees in 2003 graduated with honors, clearly demonstrating that these individuals acquired skills enabling them to achieve the academic standards of the college programs.
- Since fall 2000, with the implementation of the orientation course, retention rates for fall-to-fall have increased by 10%.
- Early intervention strategies have resulted in a decrease in undecided students from 142 in the fall of 2001, to 68 in the fall of 2003.

### Lessons Learned

One key lesson learned through the retention work is that the college must take a proactive approach in serving high-risk students. Another key approach has been to focus on providing quality experiences and frequent personal interactions with students. Students notice and appreciate personal attention. Finally, MATC has learned that increased retention results when a focus on quality educational experiences for students is infused throughout all services.

### For More Information

For more information about Muskingum Area Technical College, visit the college's web site at <http://www.matc.tec.oh.us>. For specific information on the student retention efforts at MATC, contact Robin Menschenfreund, Vice President for Academic and Student Services, at [rmenschenfreund@matc.tec.oh.us](mailto:rmenschenfreund@matc.tec.oh.us).

### 2004 CCSSE Annual Workshop

If you are part of the leadership team, faculty or staff of a CCSSE member college, mark your calendar for the 2004 CCSSE Annual Workshop – *Effective Strategies for Student Retention*. The workshop will be held on Sunday, May 23, 2004 from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. at the Four Seasons Hotel in Austin, Texas. Featured guest is Betsy Barefoot, Co-Director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College & Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at Brevard College, who will lead the discussion of effective retention strategies for first-semester and first-year community college students. For more information please visit <http://www.ccsse.org/workshop/workshop2004.html>.