



HIGHLIGHTS

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MetLife Foundation

Best Practices in Student Retention

Recognizing and Rewarding Colleges for Exemplary Student Retention and Success Efforts

This special issue of *CCSSE Highlights* is the final issue in a series which has focused on the exemplary student retention and success efforts at each of the *MetLife Foundation Best-Practice Colleges*. The *MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success*, a two-year grant-funded project, partnered with the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) to identify, recognize and reward community

and technical colleges that are demonstrating exemplary performance in the area of student retention.

Through the *Initiative*, the *MetLife Foundation* has named eight colleges as *MetLife Foundation Best-Practice Colleges*. Recipients of the awards are Central Piedmont Community College (NC); Community College of Denver (CO); F.H. LaGuardia Community College (NY); Maui Community College (HI); Montgomery College (TX); Muskingum Area Technical College (OH); Northwest Vista College (TX); and Skagit Valley College (WA).

To read more about the *MetLife Foundation Initiative* and review the exemplary practices that each of these award colleges have implemented, visit the *CCSSE* website at: www.CCSSE.org.

MetLife Foundation Honors Skagit Valley College

Featured in this issue of *CCSSE Highlights* is the exemplary work of Skagit Valley College, a 2003-04 *MetLife Foundation Best-Practice College*. Award-winning colleges are selected through a process that takes into account the colleges' performance on the *CCSSE retention index*. The retention index is an additive index that combines the college's scores in three key areas of student engagement: Active Learning, Student-Faculty Interaction, and Support for Learners. All three of these categories are important to student success; however, this overview of Skagit Valley's retention efforts features the work the college has done to promote active learning and discusses key lessons learned about implementing active learning strategies college-wide.

Defining the Issue: What Prompted the Focus on Student Retention

Skagit Valley College (SVC), established in 1926, serves a predominately rural tri-county area covering 2,118 square miles in northwest Washington State. The college has two campuses: the main campus in Mount Vernon and a campus in Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island; and three centers. In Fall 2003, the college enrolled 6,600 students. For most of these

students, the college represents their only geographically and/or economically accessible postsecondary education option.

An ambitious curriculum reform effort in the late 1980s culminated in the implementation of a new general education program in 1993. This reform began with discussions about learning outcomes and strategies for helping students understand connections between and among disciplines. The discussions were supported by research about student involvement and retention, along with a desire to increase what was perceived as unacceptably low retention rates in core classes.

The revised program, consequently, was designed around collaborative and active learning pedagogies to help students meet the identified learning outcomes. It was expected that these strategies would increase student involvement and retention by encouraging students to engage in subjects more fully and to see education as a dynamic, interconnected process of exploration and discovery.

Facing the Challenge: Utilizing Collaborative and Active Learning to Promote Student Success

The cornerstone of an SVC degree is collaborative, integrative coursework. Skills-designated courses and experiential learning

are required for both the transfer and professional/technical degrees. Interdisciplinary, thematic learning communities are an additional requirement for the transfer degree. As part of the general education program, degree-seeking students also take college-level English composition linked with another discipline. Students are encouraged to complete collaborative courses during their first year at the college.

Learning Communities combine such courses as ceramics and earth sciences (*Feats of Clay*); history, humanities, art, and creative writing (*When Worlds Collide*); literature, biology, and chemistry (*Celluloid Science*); drama and physics (*Antigone to Antimatter*); and psychology and speech (*Pillow Talk*). English Writing Links similarly combine English composition with content courses: for example, earth science (*Squid Ink*), drama (*WordPlay*), and philosophy of religion (*Joy of Sects*). All courses emphasize collaborative assignments, active learning, and exploration of ideas and issues from multiple perspectives.

SVC is committed to creating a sense of community and encouraging students, faculty, and staff to make connections. The creation of a college-wide community involves student-to-student, faculty-to-faculty, and student-to-faculty connections. The College also values “community” in the broadest sense. The support of all departments and levels is required to make this a reality. Faculty development, facilities redesign, student success courses, and facilitation of peer-to-peer support have been implemented in support of collaborative and active learning.

One example is the “Student’s Fast Track to College Success,” taught by SVC faculty and staff from student services and instruction. All students new to the college are encouraged when they go through advising to attend Fast Track. Students whose placement scores are low are especially encouraged to enroll. Approximately 100 students each quarter leave this course armed with valuable information about the college and its resources, their own learning styles, and strategies to help them manage their time and stress, be efficient readers and note-takers, and understand degree requirements. Like its instructional counterparts, this course is integrative, interdisciplinary and requires students to be active participants.

Another example is the “Peer Calling Campaign,” initiated to connect new students with “peers.” Four times each quarter, returning students make contact with new students to ask them how they are doing at the college and what, if any, support they might need. The goal is to make contact with 80% of first-time freshmen during their first quarter at the college.

Evidence of Effectiveness

The initiatives at SVC create a climate that is generating student success. The following data demonstrate the effectiveness of the retention strategies implemented at the college.

- Overall, the college has an 88% within-quarter retention rate, a 74% quarter-to-quarter retention rate, and a 44% fall-quarter-to-fall-quarter retention rate for 2001-02.
- Initial student retention and success research in 2001-02 indicated that the Fall-to-Spring retention rate for entering students who enrolled in a learning community in their first quarter was 70.2%, compared to 61.9% for entering students who did not participate in a learning community.
- A short survey, administered every quarter in every learning community, indicated in 2002-03 that 70% of the students enrolled in learning communities report that the collaborative format was a valuable educational experience and that it was more valuable for them to have taken the courses together rather than separately.
- Students who transfer from Skagit Valley College to the primary four-year transfer institution are graduating at a higher rate—from 55% in 1998-99 to 77% in 2001-02.

Lessons Learned

Reflecting on the work of the college over the past decade, college leaders suggest it is clear that to be effective, collaborative and active learning must be a college-wide effort. If a college wants the sense of community to pervade all aspects of the student’s college experience, it is essential to acknowledge that everyone contributes to “community.” Personnel in student services, facilities, library, and in the labs must strive to encourage the active participation of students.

According to SVC President Gary Tollefson, “The CCSSE results show that students appreciate the contact with faculty, advisors, peers, and staff. I am proud that Skagit Valley College is committed to student retention and the continued development of innovations in collaborative and active learning. These efforts have paid off in increased student engagement and retention.”

Faculty collaboration is a very powerful strategy for faculty development in and of itself. However, the college has learned that faculty training is needed to support the development and teaching of collaborative courses. This is even more important when viewed in light of research indicating that SVC faculty who participate in collaborative courses take the tools and strategies gained from this integrative, interdisciplinary experience to their stand-alone courses.

For More Information

For more information about Skagit Valley College, visit the college’s web site at: <http://www.skagit.edu>. For specific information on the student retention efforts at SVC, contact Dr. Maureen Pettitt, Director Institutional Research, at pettitt@skagit.ctc.edu.