



HIGHLIGHTS

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MetLife Foundation Best Practices in Student Retention

“At Santa Fe, we believe that the power of learning grows out of conversation.”

Anne Kress, Interim Vice President of Academic Affairs

MetLife Foundation Honors Santa Fe Community College

This special edition of *CCSSE Highlights* features the work of Santa Fe Community College (FL), a 2004-2005 *MetLife Foundation Best-Practice College*. Santa Fe is one of four colleges honored by MetLife this year for its exemplary efforts in helping students stay in school to achieve their educational goals. Other colleges selected are Housatonic Community College (CT), San Juan College (NM), and Valencia Community College (FL).

Defining the Issue: Why Focus on Student Retention?

Santa Fe Community College is located in Gainesville, Florida. The college enrolls more than 16,000 credit students in career and transfer programs and shares many partnerships with the University of Florida. The college became concerned about student retention and success in the late 1990s, when data revealed that the majority of SFCC's Associate of Arts (AA) students who began their studies in college preparatory [developmental] classes were less successful than their state peers at passing required exit exams. SFCC's college-level students were performing below their peers as well, although at the beginning of the decade, SFCC students had outperformed the state average. Both groups also suffered high attrition: four-year graduation rates for first time in college (FTIC) students were around 25%, and six-year graduation rates for college preparatory students hovered at 17%. According to Anne Kress, Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs, “In our efforts to serve students, we had all these different pockets of activity across the college, but people weren't working together to address the problems.” SFCC knew it had to take significant action to better serve these

students, so it applied for and received a \$1.75 million, five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Title III-Part A program to help fund its plan.

Facing the Challenge: Model Practices for Student Success

Santa Fe has taken a multidimensional approach to improving student retention, with a goal of *intentional* retention: enrollment leading to a degree. Many of the retention initiatives have been led by SFCC's Title III Steering and Enrollment Management Committees, both comprised of stakeholders from throughout the college community. In addressing the needs of AA students, SFCC has borrowed strategies already in place in its career programs, which lead Florida's 28 community colleges in retention, completion, and placement.

Advisement. In 2000, SFCC had an advisor to student ratio of 1:1,500. All students, including those attending college for the first time, could register without seeing an advisor. In addressing concerns about inadequate advisement, Santa Fe faced a challenge: how to provide the needed advising without adding significantly to college staff – an option that a limited budget made impossible. Santa Fe now requires advisement before registration through an interactive online advisement system. Students register for courses through their degree audits, generating more than 30 possible schedules based on each student's time and day preferences. The college offers both in-person and online orientation to the system and provides students with the nationally-recognized SFCC planner to help organize their term. Most SFCC students now use the online system for advising and to create their class schedules. Each year, the college adds features to the system, based on student feedback. Next fall SFCC will implement an online interactive call center.

Flexible Class Option. To improve retention among nontraditional students, Santa Fe added fast-track flexterms and hybrid online/onsite courses, enabling students to complete their programs quickly and efficiently. In spring 2005, almost 900 students took advantage of the first 7-week term, and 1400 students enrolled for the second 7-week term. These terms are offered in addition to the traditional 15-week semester. This spring alone, Kress

says, “Flexterms have brought in 2200 students who would not have been able to enroll in the community college.” While enrollment in hybrid online/onsite courses varies, Santa Fe is also seeing increases for this option.

Connecting Students to the College Community. Santa Fe actively works to engage commuter students in college life. Built forty years ago, the college was designed to house faculty in interdisciplinary units comprised of office space and common areas to foster discussions among students and faculty across disciplines. Student study groups have the option of meeting in dedicated library study rooms or in the Coffee 101 wireless café. SFCC’s focus on student life includes one of Florida’s most active community college student governments and dozens of student organizations. In addition, college preparatory faculty participate in a “reach-out” program, calling students who miss classes and connecting students with college services. Students also serve on every college committee, giving them a voice in college operations, including class scheduling and budgeting.

Evidence of Effectiveness. Santa Fe is committed to assessing the effectiveness of its efforts to improve student success and retention and to sharing this information. As part of its ongoing assessment, SFCC compares the results of its Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement to *CCSSE* data, identifying gaps between student and faculty perceptions. Other assessment results indicate that the college is making great strides. In analyzing the use of online services, SFCC is learning that as much as 40% of online use occurs after the college has closed — suggesting that a new student population is now able to access vital services.

In addition to showing increases in students’ average GPA and credits completed, Santa Fe’s retention initiatives have also contributed to the following improvements:

- Fall-to-fall retention for first time in college AA students increased from slightly less than 60% in 1999 to 65% in 2004.
- Average college preparatory success rate increased from 53% in 1994 to 68% in 2003; graduation rate increased 7% from 1999 to 2004.
- Average fall college preparatory student GPA’s increased from 2.09 in 1999 to 2.28 in 2003.
- Student satisfaction (as measured by the Noel-Levitz SSI) increased by 21% from 2000 to 2003.
- SFCC’s online advisement system has been honored as a best practice by the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) and the Florida Association of Community Colleges. Performance on *CCSSE* benchmarks, such as

Active and Collaborative Learning and Student-Faculty Interaction, increased.

Lessons Learned

SFCC has learned that, while student academic engagement and success are the keys to retention, a successful retention plan requires collaboration across all college offices. According to Kress, “You aren’t going to see the significant impact you want unless everyone is working around the table for the success of students.” Santa Fe also offers the following observations:

- Faculty are central to retention at community colleges.
- No single approach to improving retention will ever work: a college is made up of many different student populations.
- Data — both qualitative and quantitative — are required to support retention efforts and obtain cooperation from throughout the college.
- Retention initiatives should be based on best practices and research, but be *adapted for* institutional context and culture.
- Ongoing assessment of all activities is critical: strengths should be shared and celebrated and challenges should never be ignored.

For More Information

For more information about Santa Fe Community College, visit the college’s web site at <http://www.sfcc.edu>. For specific information on student retention efforts at SFCC, contact Anne Kress, Interim Vice President, Academic Affairs, at anne.kress@sfcc.edu.

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