



HIGHLIGHTS

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MetLife Foundation Best Practices in Student Retention

“Our approach to improving student retention has always been a team effort. Through the synergy of hundreds of people coming together in support of student learning, we really have changed the culture of the college.” Emily Hooker, Learning Evidence Associate

Metlife Foundation Honors Valencia Community College

This special edition of CCSSE Highlights features the work of Valencia Community College (FL), a 2004-2005 *Metlife Foundation Best-Practice College*. Valencia 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 Santa Fe Community College (FL).

Defining the Issue: Why Focus on Student Retention?

Valencia Community College is a multi-campus, urban college serving the greater Orlando, Florida, area. The college is one of the largest in the country, enrolling more than 29,600 (Fall 2004 headcount enrollment) widely diverse credit students. Valencia offers more than 40 Associate in Arts degree pre-major transfer programs leading to specific degrees at Florida universities and 36 Associate in Science and Associate in Applied Science degrees which lead to immediate entry into the workforce. In 2004-2005 more than 90% of Valencia's Associate in Science graduates were placed in jobs earning an average annual salary of approximately \$36,000.

Dissatisfied with students' completion rates during the 1980's, Valencia has worked steadily to increase student success by creating a fully "learning-centered" college. As Emily Hooker, Valencia's Learning Evidence Associate,

describes it, "For everything we do, we ask two questions, 'How will this impact student learning? How will we know?'" This approach applies to every decision made, from academics to "how we make up hurricane days," Hooker adds.

Facing the Challenge: Model Practices for Student Success

"At Valencia, we identified things we were passionate about, but could not do without additional financial support," says Hooker. Taking advantage of the opportunities available through three successive Title III grants, the college designed and built upon specific student retention initiatives. Valencia's most successful initiatives are rooted in conceptual models that are based in the literature, theory and best practices recognized to support student success. Those initiatives demonstrating measurable success have grown over a fifteen year period into sustained, integrated systems that shape the Valencia student experience.

Professional Development Programs. Valencia credits its success in serving underprepared students to its attention to developing and maintaining a well-prepared, effective faculty and student services staff. Since 1987, the college has provided a sustained program of professional development opportunities that have focused on underprepared students, diverse students, learning theory, learning communities, learning technologies, and developmental advising. Valencia's Teaching and Learning Academy offers professional development for all tenure-track faculty. A similar program is offered for adjunct faculty. Most faculty development is designed to model active and collaborative learning. As an added step, Valencia has developed competencies for faculty. Comparing student success rates prior to initiating widespread professional development to subsequent data, Valencia has consistently seen significant improvements in student completion, grades, and retention.

Developmental Advisement. Valencia's "LifeMap" developmental advising system is designed to help students increase their social and academic integration, develop career and educational plans, and acquire study

and life skills. “LifeMap” provides a five-stage student progression model that encompasses a student’s plan of action for using Valencia resources to achieve career and educational goals, a guide to help students determine where they are going and identify easy step-by-step directions for getting there, and a planning process through which students define and achieve their educational goals. Rather than asking new students “What courses do you want to take?” Valencia helps students answer the following questions: “Who am I? Where am I going? How am I going to get there?” The “My LifeMap” on-line tools help students create career, education and job search plans, as well as build portfolios. The LifeMap system integrates the developmental advising model into the curriculum, into Valencia’s business practices and procedures, and into publications and all communication to the college community.

“Start Right” Strategies. Building on Valencia’s “start right” strategic goal, the college has made changes in procedures, processes, and student/staff interactions during the enrollment process, including: setting the application deadline two weeks prior to the start of a term; requiring degree-seeking students to enroll in college preparatory [developmental] courses in an established sequence from their first enrolled term until all college prep courses are completed; revising add/drop procedures so that students cannot add a class once it has met; and implementing an automated prerequisite checking system that blocks students from enrolling in classes for which they do not have the correct prerequisites.

Student Success Course. Valencia’s three-credit Student Success course, initiated through a 1987 grant, helps more than 4,200 students annually develop career goals and educational plans, identify learning styles, build academic skills, and connect with college resources. The course is designed and delivered by faculty and student services teams. It has resulted in significant improvement in retention. The percentage of Valencia first time in college students who return for the next major session has increased from 58% in 1988 to 79% in 2004.

Evidence of Effectiveness. As a result of its retention initiatives, Valencia is seeing a steady improvement in student retention and an increase in the number of credit hours taken by students.

- Fall-to-fall retention rate of first time in college, degree-seeking students increased from 56.6% in 2002-2003 to 59.6% in 2003-2004.
- Average number of credit hours attempted per term increased from 8.4 in Fall 2000 to 9.0 in Fall 2004.

- Completion rates of cohort students enrolled in college prep reading, writing, and math all increased an average of 8% to 15% during the period Title III funding supported these retention initiatives.

Lessons Learned

Valencia credits its progress in improving student retention and success to the following:

- developing conceptual models that lead to integrated, systemic change;
- building a culture that is comfortable with measuring progress;
- collaborating to involve all stakeholders in discussing, identifying and carrying out improvement strategies; and
- focusing on students’ experience of the college.

The college primarily uses action research to test the assumptions of conceptual models, collect evidence of student success and learning, and make changes for improvement. Valencia relies on a variety of approaches, including focus groups, transcript analysis, and *CCSSE* to better understand the students’ experience at the college. Next steps for Valencia include improving assessment and closing the achievement gap between different segments of the student population.

For More Information

For more information about Valencia Community College, visit the college’s web site at <http://www.valencia.cc.fl.us>. For specific information on student retention efforts at Valencia, contact Emily Hooker, Learning Evidence Associate, at ehooker@valenciacc.edu.

Tell Us Your Story: Sharing Promising Practices

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