



HIGHLIGHTS

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MetLife Foundation Best Practices in Student Retention

MetLife Foundation Honors Gainesville College

“At Gainesville State College we are a student-focused, learning-centered environment. College-wide our efforts reflect that value.” Susan Daniell, Director of Institutional Planning and Research

Gainesville State College, in northeast Georgia, is one of four colleges honored as a 2005-2006 *MetLife Foundation Best-Practice College* for its exemplary efforts in helping students stay in school to achieve their educational goals. Other colleges selected are Parkland College (IL), St. Philip’s College (TX), and Sinclair Community College (OH).

A Focus on Student Retention

Gainesville State College, part of the University System of Georgia, serves almost 6,000 students. With an 84% enrollment increase during the last five years, the college was recently recognized as the fastest growing two-year college of its size (5,000–10,000 students) in the nation. Almost three-fourths of Gainesville’s students receive financial aid, half are the first in their families to attend college and more than 80% work while attending school.

For many years, Gainesville students have benefited from the college’s unwavering commitment to its core value—providing a student-centered environment focused on learning and growth. The college consistently shows much higher than national average retention rates, with more than three-quarters of first-time students (full- and part-time) who began their studies in Fall, 2004 returning the following fall. According to Susan Daniell, Director of Institutional Planning and Research, “Our students have access to a broad variety of excellent support services which enhance their academic success and personal development.”

Model Practices to Help Students Succeed

According to Daniell, in spite of the two-year lag in state funding to support increased enrollment, college faculty and staff rose to the challenge and not only maintained, but enhanced the college’s high level of student support. This year, increased state funds enabled the college to hire additional faculty members and academic advisors. College leaders are also building on the success of initiatives that are designed to help all students succeed, with particular attention to those needing additional support. Current strategies that show promising results focus on technology use, academic support, targeted intervention for students taking Learning Support (remedial) courses, and outreach to Hispanic students.

Gainesville’s “Point of Pride”—the ACTT Center

The Academic, Computing, Tutoring, and Testing Center is the campus hub. Open 65 hours each week, the Center offers more than 140 computers connected to the college network and surrounded by tutoring rooms. Professional tutors, with peer tutor support, offer free assistance in all levels of English, mathematics, foreign languages, and English as a Second Language. The success of the ACTT Center on the Gainesville campus prompted college leaders to create the same concept on the Oconee Campus. “We didn’t want to compromise the student experience,” says Daniell, “regardless of where they take classes.”

Technology—Integrated into the Fabric of the College

E-mail is the official means of communication at Gainesville. Each student receives an e-mail address, class sections automatically serve as e-mail groups for class correspondence, and web-based tools promote advisor-student interaction. All classrooms are technology-rich “Smart Classrooms.” Students and faculty have access to electronic bulletin boards, on-line surveys, and “Shared Class Folders” to simplify the flow of information. Wireless hubs are available throughout the campus and a “help desk” system supports students and faculty. “Technology is used to personalize, not

depersonalize, each student's academic and student development experience," says Daniell.

"Intrusive" Support for Students Needing Remediation

Based on placement test scores and a review of each student's high school college prep courses, approximately 20% of Gainesville State College students are required to take Learning Support (remedial) courses in one or more areas, including English, reading, math, science, social sciences, and foreign language. A trained and experienced Learning Support advisor works with each student until the student successfully fulfills the requirements. Faculty teaching remedial courses closely monitor student progress and are available to provide additional help outside of class. According to Daniell, "at every turn there's someone tuned into them." Learning Support students must also enroll in the college's two-credit Freshman Orientation class that meets twice a week during the first half of each semester. Students who are English language learners also receive these targeted services.

Reaching Out to Hispanic Students

The majority of Gainesville's Hispanic students are the first in their families to attend college and also face significant financial challenges. The Office of Hispanic Outreach and Development staff guides students through the admissions process and helps them access financial aid. Once enrolled, each student is assigned a peer mentor who helps with the significant transition from high school to college. Hispanic students are encouraged to participate in the Office's year-long Leadership Development Program. Many Hispanic students also join the Latino Student Association (LSA) and participate in community service activities that highlight the value of higher education for young people in the community.

Evidence of Effectiveness

To insure that Gainesville is doing all it can to enhance student learning, the college regularly assesses student satisfaction and the effectiveness of its various initiatives.

Results of the most recent ACTT Center surveys show a 94% satisfaction rating on the quality and availability of tutorial assistance, a 91% satisfaction on computer availability and quality of computer assistance, and a 95% satisfaction rating on the hours of Center operation.

College-wide technology use also brings high marks with 96% of students saying the college offers adequate computer technology, 80% believing technology use enhances their learning, and 92% saying they use e-mail to communicate with course instructors.

The fall-to-fall retention rate of students who enter with Learning Support requirements has increased for three consecutive years.

Retention of Gainesville's Hispanic students is increasing, with 73% of full-time freshman students enrolled Fall 2004 returning in Fall 2005. Hispanic students' involvement in college activities has also increased dramatically.

Next Steps

Gainesville has recently received approval to offer four-year degrees in selected programs. Even as its mission expands, however, the college values remain the same. In addition to building on current initiatives, the college's Student Success and Graduation Committee has identified new areas for expanded retention and student success efforts: 1) students who are not in good academic standing; 2) non-traditional and part-time students; and 3) students who are federal financial aid recipients.

Lessons Learned

Gainesville State College credits its progress in improving retention and student success to the following:

- A shared and clearly articulated commitment to student success flowing from the college's values;
- A willingness to be innovative and responsive to diverse student needs;
- A commitment of college resources—fiscal, human, and physical; and
- Ongoing assessment involving faculty, staff, and students with the goal of continuous improvement.

For More Information

For more information about Gainesville State College, visit the College's web site at <http://www.gsc.edu>. For specific information on student retention efforts at Gainesville, contact Susan Daniell, Director of Institutional Planning and Research at sdaniell@gsc.edu.