MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success Focuses on Starting Right

Why do so many students show up at community college doors, yet drop out before they’ve barely begun? Seeking answers, CCSSE has launched a new survey to focus attention on the critical first few weeks of community college students’ experiences—SENSE, the Survey of Entering Student Engagement. Beginning in spring 2008, the MetLife Foundation Starting Right Initiative will team with SENSE to bring you new information about student engagement for entering students—including the new-student “intake” process, classroom experiences, support services, and strategies that help students persist. Watch for the upcoming report, Starting Right: A First Look at Engaging Entering Students.

Data tell us a compelling story about community college student success. Studies of student attrition point to the fact that significant numbers of students drop out before completing the equivalent of their first semester. National data show further that community colleges lose about half of their students from one fall term to the next. And, not surprisingly, the ranks of the drop-outs are disproportionately populated by students in high-risk groups—part-timers, students of color, first-generation students, and increasingly men.

Since 2002, the MetLife Foundation Initiative has been helping community colleges look beneath their CCSSE data to better understand what factors contribute to increased student persistence, retention, and learning. To learn more about the experiences of first-time students, as well as those of college faculty and staff working to help students transition into college, the Initiative recently conducted focus groups and interviews with new students, faculty, student services professionals, and presidents at four diverse community colleges that participated in the pilot administration of SENSE. The four colleges are:

- Broward Community College (FL)
- Cy-Fair College (TX)
- Paul D. Camp Community College (VA)
- Southwest College (TX)

From this initial foray into the entering student experience, we offer a brief preview. With data from the SENSE survey and the stories beneath the data from Starting Right focus groups, we’ll be raising questions and identifying strategies that help community colleges increase entering student success.

Students’ Level of Commitment and Expectations

What students said:

- For a variety of reasons (personal and professional), students in the focus groups said they are extremely committed to finishing what they start – and truly believe they will.

- Some students said they could hardly contain their excitement when they arrived on campus. “I was excited, ready to get started!” Others were more cautious. “I wondered what I was getting myself into!” “How are they going to treat us?”

- The students brought differing expectations about college that have been passed along from high school teachers and counselors, parents, and friends. Some said, “They told me college would be hard!” Yet for others, “I expected it to be easier than high school.” Some expressed surprise that college rules are much more lenient than they experienced in high school: “I could be late and not get into trouble.”

- Despite their high level of commitment to staying the course, some acknowledged that, if they were to drop out, it would be because of “lack of sleep,” “lack of finances,” and “too many things going on.”
What faculty and staff said:

- Many questioned students’ level of commitment, their expectations about college, and particularly, their understanding about what it takes to succeed. “[Students] have unrealistic expectations about what they can and can’t do. They don’t know what it is to be a college student.” “Committed or overcommitted—some are stretched pretty thinly.” “[Students] transfer the same [high school] behavior to college.” “The students think they can do anything they want…sometimes they do the work…or don’t.”

The college “front door”

What students said:

- Their experiences differ from college to college and sometimes within the same college. Some talked about a speedy registration process during which placement test scores were immediately available and advising happened instantly. “I just went straight to Joe, registered, and that was it.” “I saw all the signs [on campus]; they were very clear.” Some learned what steps to take in a phone call before coming to campus, and “all I had to do was come in.” Yet others described “chaos,” “disorganization,” and recalled feeling disoriented when they stepped on campus: “I had no idea; it was very confusing.” “I waited in one line for an hour just to be told I had to wait in another line for three hours to talk to a counselor.”

- Students reported varied experiences with advisors and counselors. “My advisor asked me my likes to make me be certain I did what I want, not what my mom wants.” Some said they believe their meeting with an advisor saved them time and gave them the direction they needed to begin the semester. Yet others said they never met with anyone before signing up for classes or were dissatisfied when they did. “I had to go through a lot of counselors—each had a different perspective. Later, I met an old friend from high school, and she told me what I needed to do.” “When I first signed up for a class, one person told me I didn’t have to take a health class. I found out later I needed to take the class when speaking to my faculty advisor.”

Advice from New Students for the College

- Assign each student an advisor and have them know more about different majors.
- For the first few weeks, have people standing around to point students in the right direction.
- Make orientation mandatory.

So now what?

Through SENSE and the MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success, we will raise questions about institutional practices that get in the way of student success. We will highlight approaches—in the admissions process, in the classroom and beyond—that help students transition successfully into college. And we will look at what colleges can do to capitalize on new students’ commitment to succeed and influence their expectations and behavior.

To Learn More about Starting Right

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