



# HIGHLIGHTS

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## MetLife Foundation Best Practices in Student Retention

***“The commitment of each person at the college is to the students and the students’ success. In every conversation, people ask, ‘How does this help the student?’”*** Anita Gliniecki, Dean of Academics

### Metlife Foundation Honors Housatonic Community College

This special edition of *CCSSE Highlights* features the work of Housatonic Community College (HCC), a 2004-2005 *Metlife Foundation Best-Practice College*. Housatonic 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 San Juan College (NM), Santa Fe Community College (FL), and Valencia Community College (FL). This overview of HCC’s retention efforts outlines: factors that prompted the college to focus on student retention, initiatives undertaken to improve retention, and key lessons learned.

### Defining the Issue: Why Focus on Student Retention?

Housatonic Community College serves 4,700 students (fall credit headcount enrollment) in urban Bridgeport, Connecticut, the largest and poorest city in the state. Over the past eight years, HCC’s enrollment has grown more than 70%. The students are ethnically diverse and, like many community college students throughout the country, have many obligations outside of college that make it difficult to focus on coursework. When the college moved to a new location in 1997, enrollment increased dramatically and many more incoming students were academically under-prepared, financially disadvantaged, and had extensive family obligations. Today the majority of HCC students are first generation college students. Twenty percent of all courses offered are developmental. According to Anita Gliniecki, Dean of Academics, the

college recognized that “we would be remiss if we did not address the significant challenges of our student population which is, by definition, considered ‘at risk.’”

### Facing the Challenge: Model Practices for Student Success

HCC involved the entire college community in determining what approaches might be most effective in helping students succeed. Through student surveys, faculty and staff collaboration, and identification of best practices, HCC designed flexible programs based on high quality, accessible instruction, and enhanced student services. These services expand the access for students coming through the college’s door for the first time, as well as those returning to school after an absence of many years. Implementation of the strategies involved individuals in all academic departments, as well as student support services offices.

**Universal Advising.** Because “it is critical for our students” to have the support of advisors, Gliniecki says the college requires the following students — new, those returning after taking a break from college, transfer, and those changing their major — to see an advisor prior to registering. In addition, the college has created special advising days throughout each semester to encourage students to work with an advisor to select courses for the next semester.

**Tutoring – Any Time, Any Place.** In addition to extensive group and individual tutoring services offered through the Academic Support Center, Housatonic is part of a 16-college consortium offering online tutoring, specifically to insure that students have access to extra help at a time and place that is convenient for them. HCC students are the heaviest users of this service.

**Early Warning System – The Personal Touch.** HCC’s college-wide referral system insures that students are never left guessing about how to find the help they need. During the first three weeks of the semester, any student not attending class regularly receives a personal phone call and, if necessary, several follow-up messages. “We’re really quite ‘naggy’ about it!” says Gliniecki. The goal is to

make an early personal connection so that each student knows how to access needed tutoring, advising, and counseling support.

**An Emphasis on ESL Students and English Skills.** A lack of proficiency in English is a barrier for many students coming to Housatonic. Through assessment that includes a personal interview with each student and individual counseling, faculty and staff insure that students are placed in classes that are the correct match for their skill level and receive the support services they need. In addition, the college has instituted a required course for all students who test below college level in English. The course highlights note-taking, test-taking, time/task management, learning styles, and critical thinking.

### Evidence of Effectiveness

HCC tracks retention statistics every semester. The retention initiatives put in place have contributed to a slow, but steady, increase in the college's graduation rate, approximately 4% over the past 5 years. In addition, the percentage of students who are in their sophomore year of studies has increased substantially, from 19% in 1998 to almost 33% of the student body in spring of 2004. The number of students transferring to four-year institutions is also growing, with 102 students transferring in 2004, compared with 60 students in 2001 – a 70% increase.

HCC uses three specific measures of an identified cohort group to track the effectiveness of its retention strategies. Each year the college identifies students who meet the following criteria: first time enrollees, degree-seeking, and attending full time. This group is then tracked three times. The first data are collected when those students who finished the fall semester return to HCC the following spring. The second data collection occurs for those students who returned the following fall (one year after initial enrollment), and the third measure is for those who return two years later. Over the past five years, there has been a small, but steady, increase in retention in all three measurements.

In the future, HCC intends to track other cohort groups, including those within the Special Services Program and those using disability support services.

### Lessons Learned

Housatonic offers the following advice to other institutions considering taking steps to improve retention:

- Have clear goals.
- Be willing to take risks.
- Listen carefully to the community served.

In order to effectively address the broad range of issues that present challenges for students, the college has learned that successful retention efforts depend on collaboration and support across all departments. Isolating new services in one specific department will not have the desired impact. Housatonic emphasizes that communication is the key to true effectiveness. At the same time, the college has learned that each area of the college must have sufficient flexibility and autonomy to be able to adapt quickly to students' changing needs.

### For More Information

For more information about Housatonic Community College, visit <http://www.hctc.commnet.edu>. For specific information on student retention efforts at HCC, contact Anita Gliniecki, Dean of Academics, at [AGliniecki@hcc.commnet.edu](mailto:AGliniecki@hcc.commnet.edu).

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