



HIGHLIGHTS

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MetLife Foundation

Best Practices in Student Retention

“Instead of putting barriers in the way of students, San Juan College is an organization full of doorways. There are so many different doors for students to find the help they need to succeed.”

Brad Tyndall, Vice President for Learning

MetLife Foundation Honors San Juan College

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

Defining the Issue: Why Focus on Student Retention?

San Juan College serves more than 5,200 credit students (fall headcount enrollment), with slightly more than half attending full-time. The college is located in the isolated, rural, low-income community of Farmington, New Mexico. The college's service area is 5,560 square miles, and the region faces significant economic and educational challenges. Since 1999, San Juan has increased its enrollment by more than 33%. Twenty-three percent of the student population is Native American, including students from the Navajo, Southern Ute, Jicarilla, Apache, and Hopi tribes.

Eighty-five percent are the first in their families to attend college, and almost all students require some level of remediation. Most of San Juan's students do not return to college to “brush up on the basics.” Instead, they come with specific career goals. According to Brad Tyndall, San Juan's Vice President for Learning, “San Juan has created a culture of retention. We have a huge blanket of programs and services in place to help students succeed.”

Facing the Challenge: Model Practices for Student Success

San Juan College focuses on making personal connections with students, every way and everyday. In addition, rather than creating isolated programs that will serve a small number of students, the college designs strategies that build on one another in ways that increase their effectiveness. No opportunity to serve students better goes unnoticed. For example, participation in orientation is required for early registration. San Juan currently offers up to twenty orientation sessions per semester during which students learn about the college and its offerings, can meet with individual instructors, and can register quickly and easily on laptops that are set up at the session. The college even takes its show on the road – offering orientation sessions and onsite registration at area high schools.

The college strives to give students a comprehensive and innovative learning support program. Instructional approaches are designed to build academic skills linked to career goals. Focusing on the needs of its student population, and drawing from research on best practice models, the college has put strategies in place that are showing results.

Mandatory Advising System Combined with Mandatory Placement. Degree-seeking students with fewer than 24 credit hours are required to work with faculty advisors each semester to plan their programs. This close relationship with faculty advisors is contributing to improved retention. The college has also found that mandatory placement of students whose skills would be helped by developmental courses and other skill-building classes also improves retention.

Learning Communities. San Juan offers a cross-disciplinary approach, encompassing humanities, science, and business faculty; student services and learning support staff; and academic administrators. In addition, the college pairs developmental classes with other content courses that do not require the particular skill the student is addressing in the developmental course. The linked courses are resulting in higher completion rates.

Student Success Class. Three student success classes per semester are designed for first-time college students, those who have not attended school for a long time, and those with deficiencies in specific subject areas. The college currently offers two classes in a traditional three-credit format and one class beginning mid-semester. A broad range of topics are covered, providing guidance for students in school and in life. Subject areas include information about campus resources, majors and careers, time management, learning styles, how to take tests, research methods, managing money, diversity, relationships, and wellness. A service learning project is included in the course, and the course can be counted as an Associate of Arts elective.

Evidence of Effectiveness

“At San Juan,” says Tyndall, “we really are data-based. Even our [computer] screen-saver has the words ‘data-driven decisions’ on it! It’s an evident part of our culture.” The first question asked when a new program is proposed is, “Where’s the data to support the need for the program?” Student success and retention data show that a number of models the college has put in place are having the hoped-for results.

Piloted Learning Communities have had a 90% retention rate, approximately 20-30% better than similar courses that are not part of this model. In addition, anecdotal data from students enrolled in Learning Community pilots show that students find the sense of community is helping them learn, make connections, and participate in their classes. Of particular note: based on their percentages within the student population, a disproportionate number of Native American and Hispanic students are enrolling in the Learning Community model.

Similarly, the Student Success Class is showing positive results. Through tracking cohort student groups from Fall 2001 and Fall 2002, San Juan is finding that those taking the course have a consistently higher retention rate than students who did not take the course. In addition, cumulative GPA’s of students who have taken the student success class are significantly higher than those of students who have not taken the class.

Based on the success of the Mandatory Advising System, Tyndall says San Juan is moving to “more intrusive advising,” identifying students that need extra help and assigning them to one advisor who will stay with them throughout their community college career.

With a particular focus on its large Native American student population, San Juan has established a Native American Program to help students adjust to college. The

program provides support from recruitment through graduation or transfer. This program has helped increase the Native-American graduation rate by 72% since 1996.

Describing San Juan’s approach, Tyndall says, “We are always looking to improve things. We are always seeking new models of efficiency that will lead to greater success for our students.”

Lessons Learned

Combining student feedback data with its own statistics and national research findings, San Juan offers the following observations and recommendations to other colleges:

- Developing a connection and a sense of community keeps students in class and helps them to succeed. This may be especially important for a diverse, rural student population, particularly Native American and Hispanic populations for whom the importance of community and family is of great cultural significance.
- A high level of faculty communication and interaction is critical to keep students connected and help them succeed. Providing various settings for formal and informal student/faculty interaction, as well as having faculty play an integral role in advising, serves students well.
- Students make a greater effort when they have more ownership in their work.
- Data, data, data! The power of data in making decisions that serve students cannot be over-emphasized!

For More Information

For more information about San Juan College, visit <http://www.sjc.cc.nm.us>. For specific information on student retention efforts at SJC, contact Brad Tyndall, Vice President for Learning, tyndallb@sanjuancollege.edu.

Tell Us Your Story: Sharing Promising Practices

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