



HIGHLIGHTS

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MetLife Foundation Best Practices in Student Retention

MetLife Foundation Honors Sinclair Community College

"We had an 'aha moment' when we realized that a focus on retention was too narrow. We were concentrating on the fever, not the disease. We understand that it's not retention we want to fix, it's student success." Hank Dunn, Vice-President of Student Services

Sinclair Community College, in Dayton, Ohio, 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 Gainesville State College (GA), Parkland College (IL), and St. Philip's College (TX).

A Focus on Student Retention

The second largest community college in Ohio, Sinclair offers more than 200 degree and certificate programs to more than 22,500 credit students attending its current single campus in downtown Dayton. Almost 60% of Sinclair's students enroll in developmental courses. Sinclair's retention and graduation rates are low compared with other Ohio community colleges. In 2004, Sinclair reported that only 7% of full-time and 1% of part-time students enrolled in fall 2000 earned associate degrees within three years—one of the lowest completion rates of all Ohio community colleges. In addition, the college reported that only 57% of full-time students enrolled in fall 2000 were successful (graduated, transferred, or still enrolled) within three years—the second lowest of all state community colleges.

Committing themselves to improving student success, Sinclair's leaders reviewed literature and researched best practices in student retention. They also studied their own successful programs to identify those elements that seemed to have the greatest impact. Sinclair then developed a plan and put resources behind it. "We believed the need was too urgent to wait until we could locate a new funding source. We identified resources within the college and reallocated them so we could get started immediately," says Hank Dunn, Vice President of Student Services.

Model Practices to Help High-Risk Students Succeed

Sinclair students who are identified as "high-risk" are now part of a comprehensive and holistic Student Success Program that is designed to increase retention and graduation rates. "When we started, we made the program voluntary," says Dunn. "We quickly realized that the students who needed it most didn't choose to participate. We were essentially giving them a choice of whether they would like to work harder to succeed, and they were choosing the easier path." Now the program is mandatory for approximately one-third of Sinclair's incoming students. New degree- or certificate-seeking students are screened after placement testing based on risk criteria which include students requiring two or more developmental courses, poverty level income, undecided major, working full-time or transitioning from a high school dropout prevention program. Entering students with risk factors are automatically scheduled to meet with an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) counselor.

The Student Success Program is not just for new students. Currently enrolled high-risk students are referred by faculty and the Financial Aid Office for not meeting, or being in danger of not meeting, academic standards. Developmental Studies faculty members refer students through the web-based Early Alert for excessive absences, low test scores, and academic or personal concerns. For these students, Counseling Action Plans are put in place.

Using a case management approach, counseling, and web-based support system, high-risk students are supported and monitored. Counselors in the program are cross-trained in five different areas to ensure that students receive all the information they need. All case management notes are maintained online so that anyone working with the student can access the same information and deliver consistent support and advice.

Evidence of Effectiveness

To evaluate the effectiveness of the Student Success Program, Sinclair collects and analyzes data quarterly. Most recent data show that the individualized approach to serving high-risk students is working:

- Students who take advantage of the Individual Learning Plan process are notably more likely to be retained to

the next term than those who qualified but did not take advantage of the plan (74.4% for participants compared to 62.6% for at-risk non-participants).

- ILP participants are also retained at higher levels than those not categorized as high-risk (66.4%) Fall to fall retention of ILP students also notably exceeds that of high-risk students who failed to take advantage of the ILP (46.7% for ILP participants versus 39.7% for high-risk students who did not participate).
- As a result of improvements in the retention of the most high-risk students, the average first to second quarter persistence of ALL new degree- and certificate-seeking students improved over previous years for both fall to winter and winter to spring.
- The grade point average of the Individual Learning Plan student cohort was almost equal to that of all first-time degree- and certificate-seeking students.
- For the first time, there was no significant difference between minority (predominantly African-American) and non-minority student persistence for all new full-time students fall 2004 to spring 2005.

Next Steps

Sinclair plans to strengthen the Student Success Plan with additional components:

- Upgrade the Student Success Program system to allow student access to self-reported information, assessment results, and action plans; add more counseling tools to assist students with career planning and academic program completion;
- Institute learning communities that create cohort groups for students in entry level courses, especially Developmental Studies;
- Create a college-wide student success course and a more comprehensive first-year experience for Individual Learning Plan students;
- Provide training for faculty and staff to increase understanding of (1) how low-income and minority students experience the culture of the college, and (2) faculty and staff roles in improving success;
- Develop strategies that help ILP students successfully transition from developmental to college-level courses;
- Expand the college's already established connection with area high schools through the Academic Resource Center, a program that seeks to have high school seniors academically ready to do college level work when they begin college, and establish an ILP counselor to work with students transitioning from a high school dropout prevention program; and
- Find new resources to support program expansion.

Lessons Learned

Sinclair's efforts show that, with targeted processes and services, high-risk students can not only achieve, but can achieve at a level equal to those students without risk factors.

Sinclair leaders credit much of the success of their efforts to their systematic approach. "If we really wanted to help students," says Dunn, "we had to get staff to cross their work boundaries as a fully functioning team." Dunn adds that any on-going process changes are discussed and decided upon by the entire Student Success Program team.

Dunn emphasizes that the most important factor is institutional will. "Everyone wants to look at Title III as the road to change. But if improvement is needed, you can't wait. You find the resources to start wherever you are now and look for additional support as you learn what works." Once the Student Success Program was underway, Sinclair sought Title III funds to support the technical components of the program. Dunn says the grant process "forced the staff to strategically plan forward five years to create a comprehensive, holistic approach" and, according to Dunn, "receiving the [Title III] funds accelerated implementation dramatically."

For More Information

For more information about Sinclair Community College, visit the College's Web site at <http://www.sinclair.edu>. For specific information on student retention efforts at Sinclair, contact Hank Dunn, Vice President of Student Services at hank.dunn@sinclair.edu.

Register Now for CCFSSSE 2007

Registration for the Web-based faculty survey, the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (CCFSSE) is now open. CCFSSSE elicits information from faculty about

- teaching practices;
- ways they spend their professional time (in and out of class); and
- their perceptions regarding students' educational experiences.

Colleges participating in CCSSE 2007 are eligible to participate in CCFSSSE for an additional fee of \$800. Visit <http://www.ccsse.org/join/join.cfm> to join CCSSE, and then select the Faculty Survey option at the end of the process to sign up for CCFSSSE. If you have already signed up for CCSSE 2007, you can sign up for the Faculty Survey at <http://www.ccsse.org/join/joinfaculty.cfm>.