



HIGHLIGHTS

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MetLife Foundation Starting Right

Welcome to College! Don't Let the Door Hit You on the Way Out!

For a number of years, community college leaders have focused attention on recruiting more students into higher education. Happily, those efforts often are paying off, with many more students coming from previously underserved segments of their communities. Along with increased enrollments, however, colleges have also had to face a harsh reality—enrolling more students doesn't necessarily translate into a successful student experience that results in college graduation or transfer to a four-year institution.

As a result, community college leaders are designing retention strategies, many of which are showing promise. But research and practice now tell us that we need to be much more focused in those initiatives. We must start the clock earlier in our efforts to help students persist, learn, and achieve their academic goals. Studies of student attrition show us that the largest percentage of community college students drop out before their second term. Half of entering students leave between their first fall term and the next. 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.

"They need to remember that they hold this person's future in their hand...and with one wrong action or one wrong word you can totally turn them off and they'll turn around and walk out the door and never come back."

-Female Student

A First Look from SENSE Pilot Colleges

In partnership with *SENSE*, the new Survey of Entering Student Engagement, the MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success is focusing on the first three weeks of community college students' experience. To learn more about the challenges and opportunities for new students, the initiative staff conducts focus groups and interviews with students, faculty, student services professionals, and college presidents.

The initiative is gathering information from colleges that range from small and rural to those that are part of the largest metropolitan districts in the country. Reflecting demographics common to community colleges throughout the country, the majority of the students are female; attend part-time; and need remediation in one or more areas—math, reading, and/or writing. Among the colleges are some that serve primarily students of color, and many enroll large international populations.

In some of the colleges, students considered "traditional college age"—18 – 24 years old—comprise an increasing proportion of new enrollees. Several of the colleges now serve a majority of students under the age of 24.

Among the students participating in recent *Starting Right* focus groups and interviews:

- *Almost 70% of them are 18 or 19 years old; almost 80% are 21 years of age or younger.*
- *Almost 90% are considered entering students in their first term of college.*
- *More than 75% attend college full-time.*
- *Almost 75% are employed at least part-time.*
- *Almost 80% are enrolled in one or more developmental classes.*
- *Approximately 70% are students of color, with more than 40% African-American, 15% Hispanic, 12% Asian, and 28% white.*

Here We Are! Now What?

Focus group discussions with students confirm what college leaders already know—that students have mixed experiences when they first come to college—sometimes at the same college. But the discussions reveal much more than was previously known from available research. Both the *SENSE* pilot data and focus group discussions show that students arrive highly motivated, committed

to achieving their academic goals—and *they sincerely believe they will*. In addition, when they arrive at college, they tell us they also believe they are prepared for college-level work. Interestingly, discussions with entering students reveal as well that *students have a pretty clear idea of what will help them “start right.”* Sometimes they find what they need at the college...and sometimes they don't.

Who needs advice and guidance? We do!

When new students believe they are getting what they need, here's what they have to say about it...

“I like the counseling and planning. You get a call at your house saying you've got an appointment tomorrow. They tell you what you're required to do. It's very good and very important, too.”

“I like how they e-mail you and keep you informed [about] when to register and [other] dates [and activities] that are coming up. They keep you informed.”

“I like how everything is really mapped out for you when you come. You know what you're supposed to do. If you need help, you don't have to hesitate to ask. There's always somebody there willing to answer your questions.”

“My advisor asked me my likes to make me be certain I did what I want, not what my mom wants.”

“The advisors sat down with you, they told you what classes you needed to take from your [placement test] scores. My advisor helped me with everything—she helped me fill out everything on the computer, which I was not familiar with; she kept calling me back and I kept going to see her.”

“It was a breeze. They showed me step by step everything I had to do. They basically took me by my hand and said this is what we need you to do. It was very helpful. They made appointments to see you when you needed to be seen. As long as you're there, they're there to help you.”

“I saw the line and just went on one of the computers and registered. It took 10 minutes to register for all of my classes. I went to the open lab. They have one technician and about 30 computers. That's where I went first and that's where I was really impressed with what the college provides for their students.”

“They had an orientation day. I went to it. There was a room and they had an instructor who had a video. Of course they showed you about campus life. We saw it and in front of us they had computers directing us to what to pick. So I got to pick my classes. But if I didn't understand what I was doing, they had other individuals who would help you.”

“Two students who worked for the school, they walked you

around the school and they showed me everything. So I feel like I'm well prepared to go here.”

Where do we go? What should we do? Can anybody help us here?

When asked about the first time they walked through the community college front door, students frequently talk about their fears. Many say that though they are excited about what lies ahead, they are frightened and don't know what to expect. And, for many, their first experiences only heighten their anxiety and increase their frustration.

“It was chaos. Very disorganized.”

“It was my first time enrolling, so I wasn't able to register online, so I had to wait, no matter what. The first time they made me wait two hours. The second time they made me come back it was another two hours.”

“I felt alone. There's no advisor online.”

“I left and came back plenty of times. I said, ‘Oh, no, not today.’ I wasted gas in coming here and the lines are long and they weren't moving. One day I finally came back and the lines were short and I said, ‘Oh, yes!’ I didn't want to come back, but my mom made me.”

“A long wait. Gotta come back at least 30 times... for financial aid, registration, gotta come back a lot of times. There were four financial aid representatives and thousands of students. They advise you, they tell you what to do and to come back with the right stuff. Then they tell you to come back with some more stuff. And then come back again. It's constant, too. When you finally get everything, you feel like you got that ‘A’.”

“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.”

“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, so I felt it was unfair to be in some of the classes that they chose for me.”

From Faculty and Student Services Professionals

“We feel their pain...”

Students' earliest experiences don't go unnoticed by those who welcome them to the college. In focus group discussions, faculty and staff describe students' introduction to the college, frequently agreeing with students' negative perceptions, and sharing their frustration.

“[Students find] long lines and misunderstandings.”

“There is a disconnect between what students need to have before they come to campus. Sometimes they don't have the necessary documentation and the level of frustration is very high.”

“My experience in registration...and just seeing [prospective students] walk in, look, eyes pop out of their head, and then just walk away.”

“Many times after they complete the test...we lose students between applying and registering.”

“They can register online without seeing an advisor. We have seen in the past [that] students were in classes they should have never been in. So it’s possible for new freshmen to never see an advisor. I don’t like that. I think they need advising. They do not know what they should take. They don’t understand the balance of working and going to school, how this semester might affect the second semester and taking things in sequence.”

“I feel like sometimes I’m hitting my head against the wall trying to get as many students as I can to learn about a process because it is so foreign to many of them. Just to learn how to go about the process, what they need to do to complete the process. Sometimes I feel like that is a never-ending battle, and I am just treading water just to keep up.”

Helping Students Start Right

From faculty and staff...

In focus group discussions, faculty and staff offer some clear insights regarding ways to better serve entering students. Their recommendations point toward much earlier, more intrusive, and more personal intervention to help students start their college experience on solid footing.

“...what I would like to see is improving that portion between that moment when the students apply to the college and get admitted to the moment when they register for classes. Work with the students and improve that pre-enrollment portion of our services.”

“Our communication, our data for students is not great. [It’s important] to get in touch with them, to say, ‘Hey, you registered; you haven’t seen an advisor. Here’s your appointment time.’ I’m kind of an ‘in-your-face’ kind of person. I think if we got the students in to give them time to do that, to give advisors time to do that, if we got the students in, I think they wouldn’t be circling the drain.”

“I think we could go much further in terms of building relationships with students. Something we focused on when we did our reaccreditation was the incredible ratio of students to advisors—obviously it’s pretty hard to establish a relationship when you have 10,000 students to 10 or so advisors. That’s something we’ve been working on, so I think relationships are an important issue.”

From students...

Even after a few short weeks, students in focus groups are very specific about ways the college could help them start right.

“Maybe they should make the [placement] pre-test mandatory. I did horribly on the [placement test]. I thought ‘Oh, I can pass it.’ They should make it mandatory so you

could be prepared and you could improve.”

“In general, they need to make information more accessible. For example, to see an advisor, instead of waiting in two lines to find out, make it so you only have to stand in one line. Make the information more user-friendly, take the polls, find out what’s easier for people to do, find out what they can do to improve the flow of information. I think the hardest thing for us is to be able to get the knowledge that we need, to find out what we need to do, where we need to go.”

“For the first weeks, have people standing around to help and point you in the right direction.”

“When new students first come in, I think they should have a mandatory one-on-one sit-down with a counselor to really discuss, in detail, their degree plan.”

“I think it should be mandatory for every student to have an advisor. I think it would be good if everyone had somebody they could talk to who is school-related and could help you in your personal and in your educational life.”

“Have the advisors know more specific knowledge. The advisor that I talked to three times, when I asked her about what I wanted to major in, she didn’t have any clue about what to suggest. If that’s their job, to suggest stuff to help you, it would be better if they were more thorough in the knowledge that they have. Even it’s a specific field, I can understand maybe not knowing that much about it, but at least knowing something about it might be good.”

“I think each student some way, somehow, should be assigned a mentor. Sometimes kids do get de-motivated and they need that little push and they need the right encouragement. Sometimes their friends want to help them but don’t know exactly what to say. So sometimes I think we do need that mentor to keep us going because we want everybody to be successful in America.”

Some Focus Group “Ahas”

Participants in focus groups often indicate that the conversations they are having in this setting don’t take place during the regular course of business. And they suggest that such conversations might indeed help them work collaboratively to identify areas needing improvement and to generate solutions.

Acknowledging the challenges...

Faculty and staff in some focus groups describe how they are frequently overwhelmed by the amount of work to be done and the number of students to be served. Some suggest that without more staff and more money there is little they can do to solve problems. Others suggest that, while more resources would be welcomed, they can and must find ways to ease students’ transition into college with existing resources. They ask what steps they might take to broaden their thinking about how to better serve new students. Students in focus groups often echo faculty and staff concerns. Even as they complain about crowds, long lines, and their inability to get accurate and timely information, some students observe that the college is inadequately staffed to provide what students need.

Recognizing different perspectives and seeing the value of working together...

Sometimes individual staff members participating in focus groups describe very different perspectives of the student experience than those shared by their colleagues and by students. Only when they compare notes with colleagues in these settings and hear from their own students do they begin to piece together a more complete view of the challenges students face when they begin college.

In some focus groups, discussion about faculty and staff roles in the college “front door” processes leads participants to recognize that faculty have little or no involvement in students’ introductory activities. Student services professionals say, “Faculty are busy getting ready for their own classes. They don’t have time to be involved.” Faculty acknowledge that they don’t see students until the first day of class and don’t know what has transpired for students before that first day. Some suggest that a different, more collaborative approach might better serve students as they identify their academic goals and select courses.

To Learn More about Starting Right

The next MetLife Highlights will look at teaching and learning through the eyes of entering students, describing classroom strategies that students say help them “start right!”

For more information about the MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success, contact Arleen Arnsparger, Project Manager at arnsparger@ccsse.org.

“When I was in high school, I expected college to be more of a hassle—stressful because it’s college, it’s another level. When you get here and you’re in the system, you realize it’s not so bad. Once you apply yourself to it, and you become more studious, you’ll be developed into a better person...eventually.”

-Male Student

From Students...Advice to Other Students

With brief experience in their new college environment, students readily offer advice to other students. Interestingly, students’ suggestions match the advice faculty and staff offer new students.

- Register early.
- Apply early for financial aid.
- Study hard for the placement tests.
- Go to class and do your work.
- Be willing to ask questions about everything.
- Utilize resources because there is help at every corner.
- Be serious about school.
- Know what you want to do.

Join us for the 2008 CCSSE Workshop

**Tuesday, May 27
Austin, TX**

Breakout sessions:

- “Communicating about CCSSE Results and Student Engagement on Your Campus”
- “Digging Deeper into CCSSE Results and Learning More about Student Engagement”
- “STARTING RIGHT: Preliminary Findings from the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE)”
- “Strategies for Engaging Students - Colleges Tell Their Stories”

The workshop will feature Vincent Tinto, Distinguished Professor of Higher Education at Syracuse University and member of CCSSE’s National Advisory Board. Tinto will lead a special session entitled “What Works in Promoting Student Success.”

Space fills quickly, and advance registration is required. The registration deadline is April 30. To register, visit www.ccsse.org/workshop.