



HIGHLIGHTS

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MetLife Foundation

Best Practices in Student Retention

MetLife Foundation Honors Community College of Denver

This special edition of *CCSSE Highlights* features the work of the Community College of Denver, a 2002-2003 *MetLife Foundation Best-Practice College*. This overview of the College's retention efforts will outline factors that prompted the college to focus on student retention, describe key strategies implemented – highlighting the *First Generation Student Success Program* – and share lessons learned from college leaders. In addition, as part of the emphasis on featuring and hearing the voices of students, one student shares her CCD experience.

Defining the Issue: What Prompted the Focus on Student Retention?

Community College of Denver (CCD), a two-year, certificate and associate degree-granting public institution of higher education in Colorado, is the leading point of access for first-time college attendees in the City and County of Denver. The college educates nearly 11,000 students annually at its main Auraria Campus, three Denver neighborhood branch campuses, the Lowry Campus Health Sciences Center and the downtown Denver Corporate Training Center.

Since 1989, following the analysis of student data that revealed lower retention and graduation rates for students of color, CCD has made a concerted effort to serve all of the Denver community. During the 1990s, CCD's leadership recognized that CCD students, the state's poorest and most academically needy, needed extra help to succeed. In 1990, CCD developed a long-range goal to eliminate difference in outcomes for its students of color. More recently, an enrollment growth mandate from the Colorado Community College System has energized CCD's efforts to set a course to retain currently enrolled students.

Facing the Challenge: A Model Practice for Student Success

Over the last decade, CCD has implemented several key retention strategies that have increased student success.

These include mandatory student assessment and (as of fall 2001) placement, a three-tiered integrated advising model, the Academic Support Center, special population programs and learning communities. In addition, CCD has an exemplary developmental education program. The book, *In Pursuit of Excellence: The Community College of Denver* (Roueche, J.E., Ely, E.E., and Roueche, S.D., AACC Press, 2001), documents the college's nationally recognized developmental education.

Though all of the programs mentioned have had a significant role in increasing student retention, of particular interest is CCD's focus on first-generation students. The college found several characteristics of students that increased the risk of their leaving postsecondary education before completion. First-generation status – defined as students whose parents' highest level of education attainment is a high school diploma or less – was one of these risk factors. Given a first-generation population of 65%, the college's work with these students is worthy of highlighting.

First Generation Student Success (FGSS)

The *First Generation Student Success* (FGSS) program, originally funded by a Title III HSI grant and formerly called the *La Familia Scholars Program*, was institutionalized in 2000. FGSS provides a model environment for first-generation students, attending to their academic, social, technological, career and life goals.

During a student's first year of college, FGSS retains students through a combination of strategies, such as educational case management, peer-mentoring, first-year experience learning communities, a computerized drop-in lab, computerized classrooms to increase technology skills and a critical skills focus within the learning community curriculum. In addition, the FGSS Learning Technologies Support Specialist has developed a bilingual computer program and technology to meet the needs of first-year Spanish-speaking students with an interest in computer technology.

Evidence of FGSS Effectiveness

The following *First Generation Student Success* program data provide evidence of its success and effectiveness.

- A bilingual computerized survey of students indicates that 90% of FGSS students believe their culture is valued by

the college, and 83% of students believe that learning community faculty help motivate them to stay in school.

- Seventy-six percent of students in FGSS first-year experience learning communities completed learning community courses with a grade of “C” or better during the spring 2001 and fall 2001 semesters.
- In 2001-02, enrollment in the FGSS program increased by 45%, reflecting CCD’s diverse, first-generation student population.
- Graduation data for 2001-2002 indicate that the FGSS program has experienced a 55% increase in graduates over the previous academic year.
- The annual retention rate for the FGSS program’s nearly 600 students who finish their first year of college is 80%.

Measuring Success College-Wide

Recalling that in 1990, CCD developed a long-range goal to eliminate the difference in outcomes for its students of color, today CCD students mirror the population of the City and County of Denver. Between 1987 and 2001, people of color, as a percent of total CCD graduates, increased from 20% to 47.1%. During that same period, CCD increased graduates of color by 378% - from 83 to 314 graduates.

Overall, student retention rates also are high. CCD’s in-semester retention rate averages 80%, and the college has a 70% persistence rate from fall to spring semester for first-time, full-time, degree-seeking freshmen.

Lessons Learned

Reflecting on the college’s efforts over the last decade, college leaders note, CCD has learned that cross-functional faculty/staff teams provide the best support to students and increase retention. The college also sees the extraordinary results in student success and retention through learning community participation and educational case management in the academic centers.

CCD President Christine Johnson said, “I encourage our colleagues not only to seek external/grant funding for retention strategies, but to institutionalize them through allocation of general funds. These important efforts mean success in school and success in life for our students.”

For More Information

For more information about CCD visit ccd.rightchoice.org. For specific information on the student retention efforts at CCD, please contact Dianne Cyr, Associate VP Learning and Academic Affairs, at dianne.cyr@ccd.edu.

Student’s Success Story

A special part of the MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success is the emphasis on featuring and hearing the voices of students. Provided below is one woman’s success story at CCD.

When outstanding Denver Public Schools’ student Lorena Aguilar became pregnant during her senior year, she dropped out and got married. “I had always read the statistics on pregnant teens dropping out, but I never thought it would be me,” Lorena said. After much contemplation and conflicted feeling, Lorena continued her studies at Emily Griffith Opportunity School just as her son turned 1-month old.

“I finished seven classes in two months and got all A grades. I promised my husband I would get in, get out and be back home to take care of my son.”

Luckily, one of Lorena’s teachers saw her potential and brought her to CCD. “I was scared because I had no money and not one of my parents or five brothers had gone to college. I was lost,” Lorena remembers, “but the CCD staff sent me to the Educational Opportunity Center (EOC) with my tax forms, and the EOC did the rest.”

Lorena became a La Familia Scholar, and she credits the program staff and her case manager with advising and supporting her at CCD. It’s not been easy being a wife, mother and student, but Lorena is committed to reaching her academic goals.

She liked science, but decided to major in business because she thought it would be easier. Besides, her employers at the bank where she worked 20 to 30 hours a week noticed that she was a quick learner and she was bilingual. They offered to pay for business classes if she committed to working for them.

It didn’t take long, though, for Lorena to decide business was not for her. “I would get so excited when the day came for chemistry lab. My chemistry professor helped me to figure out that I could use chemistry as a pharmacist.”

Lorena struggles with the ongoing demands of being a student, mother and wife. She says she’s fortunate to have the support of her mother and her family, and for the support she received through the La Familia Scholars program, her “family” away from home.

While at CCD, Lorena served as a role model, tutor and a peer mentor in several CCD programs. She was a member of Phi Theta Kappa Honors Society, holding a cumulative 3.8 grade point average. She completed a biomedical research internship at the University of Colorado Health Science Center and graduated from CCD with an Associate of Science degree in December 2001.