



HIGHLIGHTS

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MetLife Foundation

Best Practices in Student Retention

MetLife Foundation Honors Central Piedmont Community College

This special edition of *CCSSE Highlights* features the work of Central Piedmont Community College, a 2002-2003 *MetLife Foundation Best-Practice College*. This overview of Central Piedmont's retention efforts will outline factors that prompted the college to focus on student retention, review the steps taken, and describe key strategies implemented and key lessons learned.

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

Central Piedmont Community College (CPC) is a large, urban, two-year college in Charlotte, North Carolina. During the 2001-2002 academic year the college enrolled 58,425 students, making it the largest in the North Carolina Community College System. In 1997, the college operated just one central campus; but by fall 2002, six comprehensive campus locations were opened across Mecklenburg County to ensure access for approximately 1.2 million citizens.

During the last three decades, the college experienced significant growth. This trend changed, however, in the early 1990's, with a gradual and steady decline in student enrollment. As a result of this decline, the college was not producing the enrollment needed to increase its state-funded operational budget. This became a critical issue as the college opened its new campuses. North Carolina accountability measures also forced the college to concentrate on improving retention and student success in developmental classes and increasing program completions.

Assessing the Challenge

From as early as 1988, with the implementation of READI (Recruit, Engage, Advise, Develop and Instruct), Central Piedmont had a focus on student success. By 1995,

under the leadership of CPC President Tony Zeiss, the Enrollment Management Task Force (EMT) was created to focus on recruitment and retention. By 1999 and continuing into the 2000-2001 year, EMT was recharged to focus solely on retention issues – moving beyond discussion to formulating a series of recommendations for the President's Cabinet.

In February 2001, the Students Win Action Team (SWAT) – a group of faculty, staff and students – was organized to work with the EMT and to initiate an in-depth and comprehensive plan to promote student enrollment and retention. The retention plan was to include action steps for improved student retention, counseling requirements and staffing necessary to improve student retention, suggested faculty strategies for improved retention, timelines, proposed retention goals for a three-year period, and organizational structure and staffing to accomplish the goals.

Initiatives were solicited from faculty, staff and students. The SWAT team took six months to document and define the challenge and develop seven strategic enrollment/retention goals.

Placing the Bar: Determining the Goals

Of those seven enrollment/retention goals, three related specifically to retention. The goals were:

Goal 1: Increase the number of students retained from fall 2001 to fall 2002 by 5%.

This equates to approximately 201 additional students returning from fall to fall or an estimated additional 45 FTEs. The college has retained 4,013 (47.6%) of curriculum program-declared students from fall 1999 to fall 2000 and 4,136 (51.1%) from fall 2000 to fall 2001.

Goal 2: By June 2004, increase the number of students who complete their program by 5% as compared to June 2000.

This equates to an estimated increase of 42 program completers needed to meet this goal.

Goal 3: Increase the number of curriculum students retained fall-to-spring term by 1% each year of 2002-2004.

This would equate to approximately 91 students per year or an estimated increase of 20 FTEs per year.

Facing the Challenge: Two Model Practices for Student Success

Two initiatives exemplify the success and breadth of CPCC's retention efforts to meet the goals. They are the *advising plan* and *learning communities*.

Student Success Planning (ICAN)

With several campuses and a large student population, CPCC recognized the need for an integrated overall effort to provide adequate advising services for students. Students generally cite four major factors as important in the advising process: 1) accessibility, 2) specific and accurate information, 3) advice and counsel, and 4) a personal relationship with an advisor. Based on that knowledge, the college implemented the Integrated Counseling and Advisement Network (ICAN) in 1997.

ICAN consists of an integrated set of policies, procedures, personnel services, and publications that are coordinated on a college-wide basis. ICAN uses faculty, counselors, professional advisors, peer advisors and information technology.

ICAN provides the ability to front load the student experience at CPCC with professional advisors and counselors who have the appropriate skills and training and who are accessible to work with all students. After initial advising, students consult with faculty advisors who are experts in their fields, familiar with specific courses in their departments, and knowledgeable about educational and career opportunities in their areas. Peer advisors, who are usually students, assist other students with navigating the catalog, preparing schedules, locating classrooms and other basic information. Finally, ICAN has developed a comprehensive online interactive advisement system (www.cpcc.edu/ican) intended to supplement student/advisor relationships and assist with education planning.

Learning Communities

With 18 students, the Learning Communities project was initiated in fall 2001. Learning communities – an intentional restructuring of students' time, credit, and learning experiences through linked and blocked-scheduled courses – were established at CPCC to help students find greater coherence in their learning through collaboration and course integration. The communities provide theme-based learning experiences that are consciously reinforced within the context of each course. These experiences extend beyond the classroom through service learning projects, field trips and extracurricular activities that are beneficial to the students as they develop the social connections necessary to become a true community.

To date, the classes primarily involved with the learning communities have been developmental studies courses in reading, math, English, and study skills. In the fall of 2003, the communities will be expanded to include classes in speech, basic computers, math, and English. The program has been very successful in achieving retention rates well above those of similar classes offered in more traditional formats. During 2001-2002, the learning communities had a 90% in-term retention rate.

Lessons Learned

Reflecting on work extending over several years, college leaders note: "In our efforts to address a gradual but steady decline in curriculum enrollment over the past decade, we have come full circle. All of our recruitment and retention initiatives have brought us back to the cornerstone of our existence – enhancing student success. The key lesson learned is that we must focus on a holistic approach and have a college-wide commitment to student success. Student success must be an integral part of the mission, planning, outcomes and assessment process of an institution, and must be reflected in all programs and services."

For More Information

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