



# Talking SENSE

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## ESSI Colleges Making Headway Top areas of focus include orientation, advising and developmental education

Against the backdrop of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, 20 college teams from across the U.S. convened in Santa Fe last spring at the second annual Entering Student Success Institute (ESSI). ESSI is a 2½-day intensive, guided retreat that brings administrators, faculty, and staff together with resident faculty and data facilitators to interpret *SENSE* data and formulate action plans to improve the entering student experience at their colleges. Within just a few months, more than half of the participating colleges have already begun implementing initiatives and interventions mapped out in their action plans.

This issue of *Talking SENSE* features some impactful actions taken by colleges as a direct result of their efforts in Santa Fe, as well as an update from Durham Technical Community College, a school that has followed its *SENSE* data over time to assess changes made after its initial participation in the survey.

**ESSI 2010 will be held April 11-13 in Austin, Texas.** For more information, visit [www.enteringstudent.org](http://www.enteringstudent.org), or contact Angela Oriano-Darnall at 512-475-6526 or [oriano-darnall@cccse.org](mailto:oriano-darnall@cccse.org). Register by September 15, 2009, to save \$500 on the ESSI team registration fee.

## Featured ESSI Team Initiatives

### SOAR: A New Student Orientation Santa Fe Community College (NM)

At ESSI, the team from Santa Fe Community College (SFCC) identified three key strategies for improving entering student experiences: removing logistical barriers to registration, creating a professional development program for advisors, and retooling the new student orientation program.

One of the critical things SFCC learned from their

*SENSE* data was that most of their entering students were not attending an orientation program on campus (75%) or online (97%) and that many (44%) were completely unaware of the existence of any orientation program at the college.

As a key first step in introducing entering students to the college experience, SFCC combined existing orientation and advising programs into a two-hour program called SOAR (Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration). In recognition of the impact support from friends and family can have, students are encouraged to invite at least one relative or significant other to the sessions. Sessions were offered 10 times this summer on different days of the week and at different times of the day to accommodate diverse schedules.

SOAR facilitators introduce the purpose and educational value of academic advising. Each student who has declared a major is assigned a specific faculty advisor. This early involvement of faculty in the advising process is a change for the college. In the past, faculty had actively advised students but in an informal, less structured way. In addition to advising services, SOAR attendees who have not registered have an opportunity to do so at the end of the session.

SFCC is heavily promoting SOAR through mailings and phone calls, and will be assessing the effectiveness of the program. Students are asked to complete a detailed evaluation at the end of each session. Additionally, orientation participation is now tracked in SFCC's central database, thus allowing the college to more readily compare persistence and success rates of SOAR participants.

### Financial Aid Overhaul Martin Community College (NC)

The ESSI team from Martin Community College (MCC) found troubling patterns in their *SENSE* cohort data: students were not seeking financial aid. After listening to frustrations voiced by students from Santa Fe Community College as part of an ESSI panel presentation, MCC identified financial aid advising as

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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a prevalent issue of concern. MCC used their data and the student voices as a wake-up call, and has taken steps to improve services in this area.

Starting this fall, new students can enroll in MCC's new ACA 115 Student Success course, which includes a presentation on financial aid from the school's Financial Aid Director. The college also published an Academic Success Planner and booklet entitled "MCC – I'm Here, Now What?" featuring information about and processes for attaining financial aid. Student services staff will host a September 22 financial aid workshop for students as part of the monthly "Munch and Learn" series.

The new focus on financial aid won't stop with the students at MCC. By August 17, full-time and adjunct faculty had participated in a financial aid overview. Additionally, department chairs and student services staff have participated in a financial aid webinar as part of preparations for the upcoming fall academic term.

### Mandatory Sequence of Courses

#### *Aims Community College (CO)*

A phrase heard often at ESSI from *SENSE* staff and resident faculty – "Students don't do optional" – left an impression on the team from Aims Community College (ACC). Since attending ESSI, ACC has adopted a new college mandate: students who place into college-preparatory/developmental courses must engage in enrollment patterns that support their success. To enforce this, administrators will block registration for students who test into any category of math, reading, or English at or below the 060 level. The mandate is designed to help students attain basic skills so that they are better prepared to succeed in college-level courses.

The procedure, manifested in a Mandatory Completion Chart, is part of the institutional policy on academic standards. This initiative will become

effective for all new degree- and certificate-seeking students beginning fall 2009. Students may also be recommended for, or required to enroll in, a college success course as well. The inclusion of a co-advising model into the mandatory sequence of courses allows faculty and student services staff to collaborate on the advising process for those students in a career or technical education program.

Institutional data collection measures that track student enrollment, completion, and grades in college-preparatory courses will monitor outcomes.

### Durham Tech Demonstrates Improvement with *SENSE* Data

When Durham Technical Community College (DTCC) received its results from the *SENSE* pilot administration in 2007, the college discovered that only 22% of entering students who were surveyed indicated that they had attended an on-campus orientation before their first semester. By the 2008 *SENSE* administration, the number of entering students attending orientation had grown to 41%. After comparing *SENSE* data to institutional data, it was apparent that interventions put into place after receiving the 2007 data had yielded a positive effect on voluntary participation in orientation.

*"Our participation for these two years really helped me have data to demonstrate measurable gains, which have resulted in positive change for our processes, but more importantly, increased probability of success for our students."*

#### **Thomas Jaynes**

Dean of Student Development,  
Durham Technical Community College

Though DTCC had not been requiring orientation attendance (they will, however, this fall), data suggest that the college has been moving in the right direction. The 2007 results indicated that 33% of entering students were unaware of an orientation program; in 2008, that figure dropped to 19%.

Separately, the college also saw a 5% increase in first-to-second-semester persistence of all students enrolled in fall 2008, compared to the previous year. Thomas Jaynes, Dean of Student Development, says it is too early to draw a direct correlation between the *SENSE* data and institutional data on persistence. However, "we're encouraged, and we're moving forward," Jaynes says.