



HIGHLIGHTS

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MetLife Foundation

Best Practices in Student Retention

MetLife Foundation Honors Northwest Vista College

This special edition of *CCSSE Highlights* features the work of Northwest Vista College (NVC), a 2003-2004 MetLife Foundation Best-Practice College. This overview of the college's retention efforts outlines the investment the institution has made in the hiring and training of faculty and staff and discusses key lessons learned.

Defining the Issue: Shaping a College to Focus on Student Success

Northwest Vista College, located in San Antonio, Texas, opened in 1998. Currently one of the state's fastest-growing community colleges, NVC is three years ahead of enrollment projections, serving over 8,100 students per semester. The rapid growth of the college is seen, in part, as a result of the initial planning and vision statement.

NVC opened as a student-centered institution focused on student success. The college vision, communicated and discussed widely on the campus, provides the direction necessary to unify the institution's focus on a common purpose. The college vision, values and plan clearly guide the institution toward outcomes founded on service, student success, and collegial collaboration.

The Northwest Vista College vision statement is presented as follows:

To become responsible members of our world community, we create exemplary models for:

*Learning to Be...
Learning to Work...
Learning to Serve...
Learning to Lead...
Together.*

NVC has developed an institutional culture based on the college vision, values and mission. These institutional principles are fundamental to the college decision-making process. Potential employee applicants are given the opportunity to respond to questions designed to determine whether or not they can fully embrace the vision, values and

mission as they consider how they might fit into the institutional culture. Subsequently, current employees' performance evaluations are focused on how effectively the individual has advanced the college vision and values. Continuous communication of the vision, values and mission is an important and effective strategy of the college.

Banners displaying one of the nine institutional values line the bridges and walkways of the college. Visible to students, faculty, staff, and members of the community, these banners provide a constant reminder that the college is dedicated to these values: Learning, Community, Caring, Synergy, Diversity, Creativity, Openness, Integrity and Joy.

Publications – including the NVC catalog, class schedules, annual report, and website – highlight college values. The college's weekly newsletter features an employee recognized for outstanding work and action reflecting one of the college values.

Annual faculty and staff convocations often focus on the college vision and values. For example, the theme for Convocation 2003 was the college vision.

Members of the college leadership team work at modeling the vision and values, using them in employee evaluations, decision making, development of new services, and continuous quality improvement of current services.

Facing the Challenge: Two Model Practices for Student Success

As part of the *MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success*, award-winning colleges are selected through a process that takes into account the colleges' performance on the *retention index* of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). The retention index is an additive index that combines the college's scores in three key areas of student engagement: Active Learning, Student-Faculty Interaction, and Support for Learners. All three of these categories are important to student success; however, because students have multiple demands on their time and spend limited time on campus, the role of the faculty member and staff member – and their interaction with the student – is critical.

The focus on faculty and staff at NVC is not a coincidence. From the beginning, NVC selected initiatives designed to produce positive outcomes consistent with the college vision and values. A focus on the hiring and training of faculty and staff was among the early priorities of the college.

Hiring Faculty and Staff

In an effort to create a student-centered environment, NVC leadership designed a faculty and staff hiring process focused on evaluating how well the applicant's principles and values fit with those of the college. The process actually begins with the vacancy notice.

For faculty, the vacancy notice emphasizes the college vision and values and places importance on active and cooperative learning processes. Interviewees are asked to discuss how their past experiences relate to the NVC vision and values and how they might fulfill the vision and values in their teaching and other activities at NVC. Applicants are encouraged to discuss their experience with alternative teaching strategies. Finally, applicants are asked to present a sample lesson to the hiring committee. Final selection is based on how well the applicant appears to fit the college culture.

The college vision and values are a part of the vacancy notice for staff positions as well. Emphasis is placed on "service" as an important aspect of the culture of the college. In the interview, the vision and values are reinforced. Each job is seen as resulting in service to students, so applicants are asked to discuss how they might relate their work to student service.

Training Faculty and Staff

Research supports the hypothesis that the more students are actively involved in the learning process, the more successful they will be. Therefore, NVC made a commitment to provide training in cooperative and active learning, thereby equipping faculty and staff to move toward the student success goals of the college.

Nationally recognized experts in the techniques of cooperative and active learning were brought in to lay the foundation for an ongoing training process. Faculty members successfully using cooperative and active learning strategies in Texas community colleges were engaged to continue the training. In these sessions, NVC faculty gained access to techniques that were known to work. Further, NVC faculty became part of a network of practitioners, and four NVC faculty members have received training to become trainers and are scheduled for advanced work. The president and other senior leadership of the college remain involved in the training program.

Adjunct faculty are invited and encouraged to attend all faculty training. As NVC faculty trainers become available, training in cooperative and active learning will be offered specifically for adjunct faculty members, at times convenient to their schedules. Adjunct faculty will be paid to attend the sessions, and they are aware that knowledge and use of cooperative and active learning strategies are important to their potential move to full-time status.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of this NVC initiative is critical to its success. In that spirit, a section in the student evaluation of instruction is designed to indicate whether or not cooperative and active learning is actually taking place in the classroom. By investing in a faculty training program, a total campus commitment to cooperative and active learning has emerged.

Student focus groups convened by the MetLife Foundation Initiative's staff, confirm that NVC students describe their classroom experiences in ways that are completely consistent with the active learning models that faculty and staff have intentionally created.

Evidence of Effectiveness

The administration, faculty and staff at NVC have created a climate and implemented initiatives that are generating student success. The following data demonstrate the effectiveness of the combined retention strategies that have been implemented at the college.

- Overall, for the cohort of students who registered for their first credit courses in Fall 2002, the college has a 93% within-semester retention rate, a 78% semester-to-semester retention rate, and a 51% fall-to-fall semester retention rate for 2002-03.
- A pilot program to aid developmental math students, entitled "Math Collaborative Learning Groups," indicates that success rates in such groups were 67% in Spring 2002, 70% in Summer 2002, and 77% in Fall 2002.
- In Fall 2002, the retention rate for students enrolled in learning communities, an intentional restructuring of students' time, credit, and learning experiences through linked and block-scheduled courses, was 87% (compared to the college's overall rate of 83%), and the learning communities' success rate (grades of A,B,C, or D) was 84% (compared to the overall rate of 75%).
- New-to-college students who participate in the Success Seminar, a one-credit-hour orientation course, that introduces students to the college's vision, values, and student services, and helps them to improve study skills and develop clear goals, have higher retention rates (Fall '02 - 87% and Spring '03 - 92%) when compared to the overall retention rate for the college (Fall '02 - 83% and Spring '03 - 82%).

Lessons Learned

Over the past six years, NVC has built the college from 15 to over 170 full-time faculty and staff. In that process, the college's people have learned that hiring faculty and staff whose philosophy and values align with those of the college creates the synergy necessary to realize the NVC vision. Once individuals are hired, however, constant attention to faculty and staff development is necessary to maintain the synergy around collaboration, student needs, the college vision and the skills required to support student success. According to college leaders, "We must invest in our own learning to effectively support student learning."

For More Information

For more information about Northwest Vista College, visit the college's web site at <http://www.accd.edu/nvc/>. For specific information on the student retention efforts at NVC, contact Renata Serafin, Director of Public Relations, at rserafin@accd.edu.