



HIGHLIGHTS

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MetLife Foundation Best Practices in Student Retention

MetLife Foundation Honors St. Philip's College

"Our efforts to improve student success are 'in progress.' We're pleased that we're moving in the right direction, but we're not satisfied. We think we can do much better for our students." Richard Teitz, Director of Institutional Advancement and Development

St. Philip's College, in San Antonio, Texas, is one of four colleges honored as a 2005-2006 *MetLife Foundation Best-Practice College* for its exemplary efforts in helping students stay in school to achieve their educational goals. Other colleges selected are Gainesville State College (GA), Parkland College (IL), and Sinclair Community College (OH).

A Focus on Student Retention

Approximately 11,000 credit students attend St. Philip's, a public college in downtown San Antonio, Texas. The U.S. Department of Education recognizes St. Philip's as both a Historically Black College (now 17% black students) and a Hispanic-Serving Institution (49% Hispanic students).

A rich mix of non-traditional students challenges the college to develop tailored programs that help all students achieve their academic goals. Several years ago, with fall-to-fall student retention averaging below 40%, St. Philip's leaders looked for ways to improve student success.

Model Practices to Help Students Succeed

St. Philip's has put two key strategies in place to increase retention: *Advisors in Residence (AIR)* and *First Time in College (FTIC)* programs. These approaches were selected, not to replace opportunities currently available to all students, but to strengthen services in those areas where retention figures were particularly poor.

The selection of these approaches grew out of a collaborative effort spearheaded by leaders in Student Services, Enrollment Management and Planning, Research, and Institutional Effectiveness. Together they reviewed retention literature, analyzed best retention

practices at comparable institutions, and looked at efforts showing success within their own college.

Leaders decided that both strategies could be implemented within one semester and both could be funded by reallocating existing Title III funds. According to Richard Teitz, Director of Institutional Advancement and Development, "We wanted something we could put in place quickly, see if it worked, then make needed adjustments."

Bringing Academic Advising to a New Level

A decade of data from the college's Peer Advising Program has demonstrated that early, proactive, academic advising made a positive difference in student success. Through a new *Advisors in Residence* program, St. Philip's hired 10 full-time academic advisors and placed them in large departments with retention difficulties, including Allied Health, Automotive Technology, Business, Nursing, and Natural Sciences.

AIR program advisors help students with class schedules, degree audits, course substitutions, and preparation for graduation and transfer. And there has been an unintended result of the program. "We quickly saw that students were getting stymied by college procedures and needed someone to go to bat for them," says Teitz. Advisors now serve as ombudsmen for students, helping them navigate the complexities of college life.

The advisors keep records of their contacts with individual students, noting the date, time, duration, and type of communication. In the first year of the program, advisors made more than 3,300 connections. Now in its third year, St. Philip's anticipates that Advisors in Residence will make more than 10,000 contacts with students.

An Ambitious First Time in College Program

To launch its program for students with no previous college experience, St. Philip's first identified more than 100 students who volunteered to participate in a learning community; receive intensive advising, mentoring, and specialized tutoring; take advantage of career assessment and financial assistance; and attend student success workshops and orientations.

As part of the program, St. Philip's set up four learning communities with registration and block scheduling. Students register for two or more courses, form study teams, and stay together in small discussion sections.

Since not all students can adjust their schedules to take advantage of this approach, to a significant degree the program is self-selecting.

This year St. Philip's has expanded the FTIC program, offering it to another group at greater risk of dropping out—First Generation in College (FGIC) students.

Evidence of Effectiveness

Since St. Philip's launched the two programs in 2003, both semester-to-semester and fall-to-fall retention rates have increased college-wide by almost 3%. Retention of students using Advisors In Residence has gone up by more than 3%. Comparing the retention rates of students participating in the First Time in College Program with retention of students in the general enrollment, St. Philip's is seeing a 20% increase in retention for those in the specialized program.

St. Philip's is now refining its evaluation processes so the college can pinpoint more specifically what is working for students. The college will identify and compare groups with similar characteristics of income, gender, race, and age. In addition, researchers will analyze data for the Advisors in Residence program to determine the ideal numbers and types of contact that contribute to student success.

St. Philip's is also gathering qualitative information from students in the new programs. Initial findings from student questionnaires reflect positive experiences. The college is now conducting student focus groups to gather more specific information.

Next Steps

St. Philip's ultimate goal is to expand the Advisors in Residence program to include a full-time advisor within each academic and vocational department and more than one advisor in the larger programs. College leaders now plan to hire a Chief Advisor in Residence to coordinate the program and to work much more closely with faculty. Since more than 90% of St. Philip's students require at least one remedial course, the college will next consider how Advisors in Residence can work with individual students taking remedial English and mathematics courses.

The college is also reviewing course scheduling to find ways to make learning communities accessible to more students in the First Time in College program.

Lessons Learned

St. Philip's two major retention initiatives are focused on student services rather than curriculum design. Though college leaders believe further work is needed in curriculum design, a key lesson has been that intervention by student support staff can positively and significantly affect student retention and completion.

College leaders have also learned that a delicate balance must be maintained between moving quickly to meet student needs and involving everyone in a collaborative effort. St. Philip's continues to work with faculty to fully integrate Advisors in Residence into each department's structure and to show how AIR staff members can enhance, but not replace, faculty support for students. St. Philip's leaders hope that program success will encourage others to participate for the benefit of students.

St. Philip's offers the following advice to colleges considering similar programs:

- Pay close attention to both quantitative and qualitative data to monitor progress so needed changes can be quickly identified and adjustments made.
- Involve faculty from the beginning so they recognize the added value departmental advisors bring to enhance faculty efforts to help students succeed.

For More Information

For more information about St. Philip's College, visit the College's Web site at <http://www.stp.accd.edu/spc>. For specific information on student retention efforts at St. Philip's, contact Richard Teitz, Director of Institutional Advancement and Development at rteitz@accd.edu.

Upcoming CCSSE & MetLife Sessions

**Council for the Study of
Community Colleges Conference**
April 21st – 22nd, Long Beach, CA

- ◆ *The Compensatory Effect: Examining the relationship between student engagement and educational outcomes for Black and Hispanic students*
- ◆ *Community College Student Latent Persistence Trajectories*

AACC Annual Convention
April 22nd – 25th, Long Beach, CA

- ◆ *Student Retention: How Good is Good Enough?*

2006 CCSSE Workshop
Student Engagement through Collaborative Learning
May 28th, Austin, TX

**NISOD International Conference on
Teaching and Leadership Excellence**
May 28th – 31st, Austin, TX

- ◆ *Building Relationships that Promote Student Success*
- ◆ *Students Speak Out About Student Retention*

Visit <http://www.ccsse.org> for more details.