

Student Support Services at Community Colleges: A Strategy for Increasing Student Persistence and Attainment

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Community colleges are a significant part of our country's educational landscape. Even though these institutions have been in existence since 1901, the 1947 Truman Commission Report gave rise to the community colleges of today. The report called for the widespread establishment of affordable public colleges that would serve community needs and offer comprehensive educational programs.¹ Since then, community colleges have grown exponentially and now serve as a gateway to opportunity for millions of students.

Because of their open-admissions policies, convenient locations and course schedules, close relationships with local business and industry, and lower cost relative to other institutions, community colleges are accessible to millions of students. According to the U.S. Department of Education, nearly 43 percent of all undergraduates are enrolled in a community college.² Given their distinct and sometimes contradictory missions and vast array of constituencies served, it is difficult to categorize community colleges and the approaches used to improve students' educational outcomes under the one-size-fit-all designation.

Increased attention is being paid to the services, functions, and outcomes of community colleges, particularly as they affect student persistence and completion. A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education found that among students who enroll in community colleges with the intent to earn a credential/degree or to transfer to a four-year institution, almost one-half do not reach this goal within six years.³ Low-income and minority students are particularly vulnerable to dropping out.⁴ And, while enrolled, many students require

two or more remedial classes (primarily in English or math), experience difficulty covering college costs, and struggle to balance competing priorities (school, family, work).⁵ All of these factors increase the likelihood of dropping out and reinforce the perception of community colleges as revolving doors.⁶

Yet despite this perception — legitimate or not — community colleges remain central to conversations swirling within the higher education and policy communities around “student success.” In order for such conversations to be productive and fruitful, they must begin and end with *the student* as the focus. Placing students at the center of institutional policy and practice can lead the way to improved student outcomes and a more equitable distribution of opportunity.

One strategy for increasing student persistence and achievement outcomes lies in the area of student support services. These types of services are a standard feature at most higher education institutions. A modest body of research suggests that student support services play a role in promoting successful outcomes for community college students. This paper examines the current research on student services in community college settings, model programs, and suggested approaches for improving these services. While many promising practices are offered, it is important to note, that this paper does not address the type of resources needed for effective implementation.

Current Research & Models of Promising Practices at Community Colleges

For years, researchers and practitioners have demonstrated that student support services are

critical to students' academic success in college; however, the vast majority of this work focuses on four-year institutions. The community college sector has been largely overlooked in this area of research. More recently, several well-designed research projects – which will be discussed in this paper – have provided insight on the benefit of student support services and the key elements of a system aimed at success for all students. Effective support services have an integrated network of academic, social, and financial supports.⁷ When implemented in a coordinated, targeted, and comprehensive structure, these initiatives have been shown to improve student achievement.⁸

Academic Guidance and Advising

Academic guidance and advising – arguably the most important student services – are areas where students need tremendous help.⁹ Improving academic services at community colleges is crucial because most entering students arrive with academic deficiencies that limit their ability to engage effectively in college-level courses.¹⁰ Early research on the collegiate experience by Pascarella and Terenzini suggests that institutions can enhance the academic experience of under-prepared students by providing extensive instruction in academic skills and advising.¹¹ Although this research focuses primarily on four-year colleges, later research confirms that the findings are also applicable to community college students.¹²

Student success courses, learning communities, and other efforts that seek to integrate students into college life can help students who are struggling academically. Student success courses prepare students for the rigors of college life, teaching time management skills, basic skills, study skills, and critical thinking strategies. The Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teacher's College, Columbia University examined student success courses in Florida community colleges and found them to be effective in promoting academic achievement.¹³ Similarly, research on learning communities show positive effects on student retention.¹⁴

Learning communities have different formats, but a typical model enrolls a student cohort in bundled courses, with the same instructors. A study at

Kingsborough Community College found that instruction through learning communities increased students' likelihood of passing required courses.¹⁵

Structuring effective developmental courses is perhaps the most important academic issue confronting community colleges today. Because extensive remediation can delay completion, institutions must offer quality programs, tailored to students' needs. Bunker Hill Community College offers developmental courses in different formats and on different schedules to accommodate students. These courses are offered directly through the relevant academic department, rather than through a central developmental education department. Additionally, academic advisors work closely with students to identify courses that are appropriate for their learning needs. While there are a variety of strategies for structuring developmental education programs, the methods used at Bunker Hill Community College have produced results, showing increased persistence and grade point averages.¹⁶

Students must also be encouraged to create an educational plan geared toward degree/credential completion, transfer, and/or career preparation. A tailored educational plan can put students on the path to success. For students interested in transfer, such a plan can ensure that course selections improve chances for acceptance and the pursuit of a particular major. The Illinois Board of Higher Education provides funding to twenty-five community colleges to operate transfer centers that are designed to help facilitate transfer. It is estimated that over 25,000 students are served by these centers annually, and the transfer rates for African American and Latino students increased as a result of participation.¹⁷ Research suggests that requiring students to begin planning in these key areas – degree/credential completion, transfer, and/or career preparation – as early as the first semester, can improve chances of persistence and completion.¹⁸

Counseling and Social Networks

Regardless of how academically prepared students are for college, even well-constructed educational plans can be significantly altered by both unexpected life events and ongoing personal

problems. Through the Opening Doors project, researchers from MDRC conducted focus groups of community college students who confirmed that personal problems were a major impediment to their academic pursuits.¹⁹ Given that much of the attendance and academic patterns of community college students is “more dependent on their personal lives, their jobs, [and] the outside world,”²⁰ campus leaders committed to helping these students succeed must ensure that supports, such as counseling, mentoring, and peer networks, are available to help them cope and manage everyday pressures of work, family, and school.

Personal guidance and counseling can help community college students confront academic as well as nonacademic challenges. Although most institutions offer these services, students may be reluctant or unable – due to time constraints – to take the initiative and seek out assistance on their own. In a review of the literature on the impact of counseling on student retention, it was found that counseling increases the retention of students with high risk factors for dropping out.²¹ The structure and offerings of personal guidance and counseling services vary from campus to campus. In some cases, students are offered individual or group sessions with licensed, professional counselors. In other cases, faculty members may serve as counselors or mentors to help students address personal concerns. The faculty-student interactions are often more informal than the professional counseling services.²²

Because nearly 30 percent of community college students are parents,²³ some institutions have begun to involve the family network in counseling and other support programs. The Family Education Model (FEM) – commonly used at Tribal Colleges and Universities – addresses the need for family-based interventions. Although these institutions all use different family support strategies, they each ensure that student-service practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development and institute retention programs that are flexible and responsive to emerging family and community issues.²⁴ Additionally, some community colleges offer child care services as a means of addressing familial needs. Participants in the Opening Doors focus group discussions noted

that child care was one of the “primary factors that influenced their decisions to attend or complete college;” however funding for child care centers is limited and insufficient to meet demand.²⁵

Students also connect and develop strong social networks with other students. Just as peer tutors are used to provide academic guidance and support, they can also advise their peers on some personal problems. Students who are counseled by fellow students find that the camaraderie and friendship established through the peer relationship can often provide the level of encouragement and support needed to help cope with challenging situations. For example, Houston Community College’s Minority Male Initiative has helped young Black and Latino men develop stronger peer networks that strengthen their academic and social development.²⁶

Technology has introduced new forms of connecting and networking through emails, text messages, and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. While few studies have investigated the linkage between social media and college students’ success, preliminary findings speculate that these sites allow students to access and share information easily, and it allows them to maintain and develop networks with relative ease. Several institutions are experimenting with the use of texting and social media to keep students informed about institutional news, deadlines, services, and other resources.²⁷

Financial Aid Advising and Funding

Financial aid advising and funding are central to student support. After all, many students cannot enroll – let alone remain enrolled – without ample financial assistance. In a study conducted by the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), 45 percent of the respondents indicated that finances were critical to continuous enrollment in college. Additionally, over three-quarters of survey participants said that financial aid advising was one of the most important support services, but at the same time, expressed frustration with their experiences with the financial aid services offered on their campuses.²⁸

To improve student persistence and accelerate completion of community college degrees and certificates, the literature offers four financial-aid strategies to consider include: (1) providing more intensive financial aid counseling to ensure that students apply for and receive all the aid to which they are entitled; (2) offering financial literacy programs to help students better understand the role of finances in life's decisions; (3) offering financial incentives to students to complete key academic milestones or earn good grades; (4) and offering emergency aid or vouchers. Recognizing that many students were leaving "money-on-the-table"²⁹ and making unwise financial decisions, many community colleges have increased efforts around financial advising and financial literacy. Valencia Community College has introduced the Life Maps course that provides instruction on various aspects of financial planning.³⁰ In addition, the philanthropic arm of USA Funds has helped leaders at minority-serving institutions improve financial literacy services and understand its connection to improved retention.³¹ Also, research conducted by MDRC shows that low-income single mothers are more likely to complete college courses if they receive performance-based scholarships that require them to maintain a specific grade point average and hold regular meetings with an advisor.³² Emergency grants and vouchers have helped many community college students with small emergencies and lower-cost expenses, such as books and transportation. Fort Peck Community Colleges' gas voucher program provides this type of aid to needy students.³³

Final Thoughts

Because so many community college students spend limited time on campus, they have fewer opportunities to make use of all of these services. Colleges can address this challenge by taking steps to integrate support services, using technology where appropriate, into other activities and experiences that students have on campus. Additionally, attempts are being made to offer support services through a more centralized approach, rather than in the decentralized fashion that is customary at many institutions. In a study of effective strategies for student service programs at community colleges, it was recommended that

institutions offer more "enhanced student services."³⁴ Such programs would then be linked to other services, but also integrated into existing campus-wide reform strategies, thereby allowing student services to be offered, in a coordinated fashion and over an extended period of time. Since many students encounter ongoing challenges throughout their academic career – related to academic, social, and financial needs – it is imperative to offer students linked and sustained services in all areas of the college.

One of the most widespread integrated student service programs is Student Support Services (SSS), funded under the federal TRIO programs. SSS is an educational program that provides first-generation students with opportunities that help them successfully complete their degrees/credentials, offering academic development, counseling, financial guidance, and career development opportunities. In an evaluation of SSS programs, one of the five colleges examined was a community college, and it was found that these programs played a positive role on students' overall academic and social integration.³⁵

Community colleges have also experimented with the one-stop approach to student services. Research conducted by the CCRC has found this to be an effective strategy for delivering student services, as it helps students better understand and navigate the programs and services of the institution.³⁶ At Lorain County Community College, a one-stop approach to academic guidance and counseling has been implemented. The center, managed by staff from the student services department, assists new and returning students with a variety of services, ranging from admissions and financial aid to advising and registration to academic enrichment courses and personal counseling. The center also provides specialized services to veterans and military personnel, international students, and English as Second Language (ESL) learners.³⁷

In closing, community colleges are a key entry point to higher education for millions of Americans. Many of these students come from varied walks of life and arrive at the doors of these institutions with differing learning styles and degree aspirations. In spite of the differences, these students share a unifying desire to make sufficient

academic progress towards an educational goal. Very often, these students also encounter barriers in pursuit of these educational goals. While many community colleges have been responsive to these concerns, much more focused attention and effort is needed.

This paper has highlighted some efforts and strategies related to student success, particularly in the area of student support services. Due to space limitations, the paper does not provide an exhaustive list of examples, but highlights promising practices that support key areas of research. However, the examples highlighted here – as well as those not included – confirm that what we think should help community college students – in fact, “does.” However, these institutions are resource constrained and often have to make tough decisions and trade-offs simply to stay afloat.³⁸ For additional information or resources, please feel free to contact the staff at the Institute for Higher Education Policy.

Endnotes

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