

THE NISOD PAPERS

An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.



Increasing Student Engagement at St. Petersburg College: How a Pilot NSLS Chapter Improved Student Success and Retention

As the first two-year college in Florida, St. Petersburg College (SPC) has a long history of educating students and preparing them for their careers. In recent years, SPC struggled (as many other colleges and universities do) with engaging its students and retaining them, especially Black male students. Administrators at SPC explored various options to improve engagement and retention. They understood the need to offer students valuable co-curricular activities that strengthened their bond to the college through an active community of peers while also helping them develop skills employers seek.

To test the impact on engagement and retention, administrators began a pilot program of The National Society of Leadership and Success (NSLS). Established in 2001, the NSLS is the largest leadership honor society in the country, consisting of more than 1.2 million members and more than 700 chapters. Their accredited leadership training program helps students define personal success, create a plan to achieve it, and develop in-demand skills.

SPC wanted to determine if an NSLS chapter would improve engagement and retention for their students, especially Black male students. As part of their NSLS pilot program, SPC sent a limited number of invitations to Black males at SPC's Clearwater Campus to participate in the Take Stock in College program.

Within only one semester, retention increased among the new NSLS members, as did these students' success in the classroom. Stephanie Henningsen, Student Life and Leadership Coordinator and NSLS Chapter Advisor, believes this increase is a direct result of the students joining a community of success-oriented peers and engaging in the leadership program. "I've seen how the students have developed comradery with one another as they discuss what their goals are and their plan for obtaining them," she said.

Of the new members, 24 were Black, most of whom were male. Those 24 members achieved:

- 37 percent increase over the college-wide retention rate.

- 26 percent increase in success rate* compared to all Black males.

*Success Rate is the percentage of credits enrolled that results in a grade of A, B, or C and is calculated as: Successfully Completed Credits/All Credits Attempted.

About the NSLS

As the nation's largest leadership honor society, the NSLS helps students achieve their definition of personal success. Members must complete the accredited leadership training program to become fully inducted.

- Mission: Building Leaders Who Make a Better World.
- Total Number of Members: 1,213,949 (Spring 2020).
- Total Number of Chapters: 711 (Spring 2020).
- Accreditations: Cognia and the National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS).

NSLS Member Benefits

- \$350,000 in Scholarships Awarded Annually.
- Exclusive Job Board.
- Community of Leaders.
- Live-Streamed Events With Industry Leaders.
- Partner Discounts With National Brands.
- Personalized Letter of Recommendation.

Five Steps to Induction

1. Orientation: Meet your chapter and learn the schedule of events for the semester.
2. Leadership Training Day: Attend an interactive training to discover how to achieve your goals.
3. Three Speaker Broadcasts: Learn how celebrities, entrepreneurs, and others have achieved success.
4. Three Success Networking Teams: Meet in small groups to set goals and hold each other accountable.
5. Formal Induction Ceremony: Celebrate your achievement with your family, friends, and peers.

Why the NSLS?

According to the McGraw-Hill Education 2018 Future Workforce Survey, only 41 percent of students feel extremely or very prepared for their careers. Additionally, fewer than half of students report feeling they've gained the critical skills needed to transition to the workforce, such as complex problem solving, resume writing, workplace technologies, and interview skills. This disconnect has led to a dramatic decrease in retention rates, especially at two-year institutions. In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), two-year institutions have an average retention rate of only 62 percent, 23.5 percent lower than four-year institutions.

As college administrators at two-year institutions struggle to retain students, they seek co-curricular activities that help students develop additional skills required for the modern job market. They also look to incorporate programs that build a community on campus. SPC believed the NSLS would deliver on these needs because they provided an opportunity for students to:

- Set long-term goals.
- Collaborate with other students to create a plan to achieve these goals.
- Share their struggles with a community of like-minded students.
- Develop 21st century skills, such as communication, collaboration, and critical thinking.

Student Experiences in the SPC Chapter of the NSLS

When he received his invitation to join the NSLS, Keenan Murray wasn't sure what to expect. However, after learning about the benefits the program had to offer, including resume building, the opportunity to expand upon current leadership skills, and gaining hands-on experience to learn additional leadership qualities, Murray considered it "the opportunity of a lifetime."

"This program does a really good job of strengthening your leadership traits. It is almost like they give you this self-awareness of traits you didn't know that you had," said Murray, a Business Administration major.

As one of 13 formally inducted members from St. Petersburg College, Murray has built upon the leadership skills he acquired in the NSLS and has become more active on campus. Today, he also serves as Secretary of the Clearwater Campus Student Government Association. For Murray, one of the biggest attractions of the NSLS program was building a community on campus by learning about his peers.

"It showed that no matter who you are, you still have leadership traits," he said.

The NSLS program also received positive reviews from De'Laun Wesley, a second-year English major. "To me, this program is deeply needed--leadership is greatly needed now more than ever and this program [develops] leaders," Wesley said. "It's beneficial, from my standpoint, that students of all ages take part in a leadership program such as this."

While he believes that developing leadership skills is essential, Wesley also mentioned the impact the community has had on him. "I can honestly say that the NSLS has been a life-enhancing program. The impact it had on me and my NSLS team is that we have built life-long relationships that will prove useful later in life," Wesley said.

How the NSLS Helps Increase Student Engagement and Retention

In recent years, more and more students have struggled to earn their degree, both at two-year and four-year institutions. In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) only 33 percent of students who began attending two-year institutions in Fall 2015 graduated within three years.

The report also stated that 41 percent of students were no longer enrolled in the first school they attended and had not been reported as a transfer at a different institution. In other words, nearly half of students were no longer pursuing their degree within three years.

Henningsen, NSLS Chapter Advisor at SPC, has seen a dramatic increase in student retention and engagement in students who accepted their invitation to the NSLS. This level of engagement has resulted in higher retention rates for NSLS members and improved their success in the classroom. Some students, such as Keenan Murray, have become even more engaged on campus by joining other organizations.

Additionally, Henningsen believes the increase in retention rates is tied to the community and close-knit bonds students build through the NSLS. "Having the National Society of Leadership and Success on campus allows students to focus on who they are and how to relate with others. During our first year in the program, I have seen shy students come out of their shells to talk with their peers," she said. "I also have students comment on how the Speaker Broadcasts have helped them to focus on their goals."

Key Results From NSLS Members at St. Petersburg College:

- 92 percent retention rate: Including graduates, this is a 37 percent increase over the college-wide retention rate.

-
- 81 percent success rate*: A 26 percent increase over the success rate of all Black males.

*Success Rate is the percentage of credits enrolled that results in a grade of A, B, or C and is calculated as: Successfully Completed Credits/All Credits Attempted.

As the St. Petersburg College pilot program has shown, NSLS members retain and graduate at higher rates than the student population as a whole because they are engaged with a community of success-oriented peers helping them to achieve their goals.

Stephanie Henningsen, *Student Life and Leadership Coordinator*

For more information, contact the author at St. Petersburg College, henningsen.stephanie@spcollege.edu, or contact Ashleigh Smith at The National Society of Leadership and Success, asmith@nsls.org.