



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## *START—Special Support for High-Risk Students*

Community colleges offer an open door to students who might not otherwise have a chance at higher education. But beyond the pale of those born-again learners, what about the next level—those who face special barriers that seem to preclude any college?

Kirkwood Community College found some encouraging answers to that question when it partnered with the Hall-Perrine Foundation in START (Supported Training and Retraining). The START program offers enhanced financial assistance and support services to persons under the 150 percent poverty income line who also face other barriers to education. In return, the special students must strictly conform to individual education plans. They are required to enroll in career-option type programs leading to employment.

In its first five years, START guided 64 percent of its students to completion—either finishing a prescribed study program, progressing toward graduation, transferring to another college, or completing Kirkwood studies and finding employment. Of special significance is that completion records and retention rates for many special high-risk students are higher than for the student body at-large.

Students make application to START through a college committee and are formally accepted by the project director. START committee members study each application for evidence of some prior success: e.g., adequate high school grades, a GED diploma, good standardized test scores, or positive references from educators or employers. Students must complete their education plan within four consecutive semesters. They are required to submit class attendance reports to project staff members on a weekly basis. Students are allowed as much as \$4,000 for college costs and for child care assistance during their four-semester period of study. Staff advisors regularly monitor students' progress on their individual plans. Students are not allowed to change study majors or alter their individual education plans without advisor approval. They are not allowed to enroll in liberal arts programs, but must focus on specific career goals.

The goal of the program is to move high-risk students toward self-sufficiency, or productive employment. Kirkwood administrators say that an internal

goal is to teach students to learn how the education "game," or process, really works.

One START objective was to bring a new pool of at-risk students to college. It has accomplished this by including representatives of many community helping agencies on its advisory board. Close cooperation between the college and several non-education agencies in the community has caused persons who otherwise might not consider college to enroll for career studies. This strong link to community has produced a flow of needy students by referral from the agencies.

A large majority of START students are women. Almost three-fourths have need for child care assistance while enrolled. Some are victims of abuse or have special personal problems. All face some special barriers to education.

Kirkwood's alliance with Hall-Perrine is also unique. The foundation historically has supported private college causes and has not donated to public colleges. It has never funded programs that give direct financial support to individual students. But START appealed to the foundation as a way to improve quality of life in the community by targeting needy students, and Hall-Perrine provided \$1 million for the new five-year program. Support from the private foundation makes the special support for high-risk students in START financially feasible.

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# Competitive Colleges and the Community College Student

More than 20 years ago, one of Arapahoe Community College's English professors surmised that even the most extraordinary students at our college seemed to think that their transfer options were limited to in-state, tax-supported colleges and universities. He began to work with outstanding students to help them prepare for and make application to some of our nation's elite, more competitive colleges. Success was quick in coming: one of his earliest transfer students graduated Phi Beta Kappa, with distinction, in political science, from Colorado College; another graduated *magna cum laude* from Lake Forest.

When the college president expressed an interest in establishing an honors program, this same professor argued that honors courses in our regular curricular offerings were not warranted, that courses were of a calibre to challenge even the brightest students. Rather than instituting special courses, this professor proposed that the Honors Institute *identify and guide students who could qualify for admission to the nation's elite, competitive colleges*. That remains the guiding principle of the Honors Institute to this day and is part of the college's mission.

Many of our transfer students have distinguished themselves at our nation's most prestigious colleges and universities. Two students were invited by St. John's College (Santa Fe/Annapolis) to skip the B.A. and go directly into the M.A. program. The first won that college's annual fiction writing award, and now teaches in our English department and serves as an Honors Institute advisor. New advisors are urged to attend the colloquia to acquaint themselves with Honors Institute strategies.

Among the more than 50 elite colleges that have accepted ACC students are Amherst, Brandeis, UCLA, Carnegie-Mellon, Claremont, The Colorado College, Georgetown, Lake Forest, Notre Dame, Northwestern, Ripon, and Willamette. Using a conservative estimate, 218 students over the last 15 years have saved well in excess of four million dollars in the costs of their final two undergraduate years.

Honors Institute students must carry a GPA of 3.0 or better; pursue a traditional degree program; and demonstrate accomplishments in extracurricular activities. They must work closely with an Honors Institute advisor in determining curriculum, work hours, extracurricular activities, and so on. And, they must attend a series of colloquia. Topics discussed in the colloquia include the importance of curriculum;

importance of extracurricular activities; the liberal arts tradition; meaning of a degree; meaning of a major; selecting transfer colleges; using relevant reference works; contacting transfer colleges; making applications; writing a resumé; planning for graduate school; financial aid; private and public colleges; diversity as part of the educational experience. Currently, 10 faculty members serve as advisors in the Honors Institute. They perform this service as a "mission of love," receiving no compensation for their efforts.

The Honors Institute has become a unique part of our mission.

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