



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

A FIRST-SEMESTER LEARNING COMMUNITY FOR ADULT WOMEN

As in so many other community colleges, adults have become a growing segment of our student population. Half of the students at Moraine Valley are over 25, and almost 60 percent of these are women. They frequently come to the college experience with a host of concerns and worries: memories of negative high school experiences, rusty academic skills, low self-esteem and confidence; they have fears of blending into a campus with traditional age students, juggling their multiple roles, and balancing their incredibly demanding and busy lives. Typically, re-entry students initially enroll for a part-time program. This often means registration by touch-tone phone or on the Internet (convenient, but with little access to more than the most perfunctory information); they don't have to see a counselor or take placement tests (unless they are registering for a math or introductory writing course); they can even choose to bypass orientation sessions.

In my almost 30 years of teaching at the college, I have found that many of these adult students have not assessed their skills, thought through an educational plan, or have information about the many resources and support services offered by the college. Almost 70% of our classes are taught by part-time adjuncts, so many students may not have contact with an instructor who advises or mentors.

The Returning Woman's Program is one response to these barriers to success. Re-entry students spend three mornings (or two evenings) together taking a block of courses—writing, reading, sociology, and college success. Writing skills learned in communications can be practiced in sociology papers, or in college success journal writing. College success teaches study skills, explores individual learning styles and preferences, tackles the common problem of test anxiety, and encourages development of time management skills.

Study groups are formed early in the semester. Each woman has the opportunity to share her writing, study for exams, discuss problems in any of the courses, and

develop new ideas for learning in a smaller sub-group. One objective is to help students develop a self-awareness of the learning process and transfer these insights into other courses. In addition to working on skills for academic success, attention and discussion are devoted to personal issues. Many re-entry women are dealing with important life transitions, divorce, abusive relationships, economic hardships, and job decisions. Talking with a supportive group has been critical to their survival in the college setting.

The instructor of the success course is a trained counselor who requires each student to have two personal counseling sessions during the semester; most come back for more. Support services are built into the program, including educational goal setting, career planning and development; tutoring services; a child care center for pre-school age children. By the end of their semester in the program, students are aware of the range of support services available and have learned to negotiate the college's bureaucracy. The faculty in the program are all strongly committed to the needs and aspirations of adult women students. They respect the authority of their experience, acknowledge the many demands of their complicated lives, and attempt to connect the curriculum to personal issues. Collaboration between program faculty and student development personnel, complementary curricular experiences, and a strong support system among the students are central components to the success of this first-year experience.

Two longitudinal studies of program participants found that the retention and graduation rates of these students far surpass those of more traditional students. For example, 78 to 90 percent of the students attending between 1989 and 1993 registered for classes the semester following their enrollment in the program. The retention rate for all students during the same time ranged between 51 and 64 percent.

Over 1000 women have completed the program. Anecdotal reports, comments from the women, and in-depth interviews conducted for an ethnographic study confirm that this learning community is a successful start for their college experience. For many women, it is a life-changing, transformative experience, as well.



The development of a cohort group, a personalized learning community with intensive academic and social supports, can be effective with other students, too. While traditional-age students have somewhat different needs and issues, they too are dealing with personal barriers to college success such as motivational problems, poor academic skills, a lack of coherence in their educational goals. Their entry experience at college can be just as fragmented; many of my students have never seen a counselor, thought hard about what they need to do to succeed, or understand the connections between their various courses. Like many other community colleges, Moraine Valley now has plans to require an eight-week college success course for all entering

CYBER ORIENTATION: THE FUTURE IS NOW

Broward Community College is committed to the development of the total student. Many of our students are not only first-generation in college, but also first-generation in the United States. They often arrive under-prepared in basic skills. It is our philosophy that a comprehensive orientation program can disseminate critical information, promote self-sufficiency, and ease the transition into college—thereby increasing student success and retention. Most of our students participate in a four-hour new student advisement and registration session on campus. However, those unable to attend the campus session must be welcomed, too.

BCC has responded to this need by providing information and a variety of services over the World Wide Web, via Cyber-Orientation, an orientation program which may be accessed 24 hours a day. Cyber-Orientation acts as a substitute and/or supplement to our on-site program. The information it provides is relevant to all students: programs of study, the college catalogue, what to expect in class, appropriate classroom behavior and decorum, academic standards of progress, balancing school with work and family, course load, support services, course scheduling, and self-registering using campus computers or phones.

Students may choose native or non-native English speakers to review test scores and determine proper course placement. Students access specific degree requirements and other information pertaining to the degree or major they are seeking. The program culminates with a twenty-question quiz to assess each student's grasp of the information. New students,

students. While this is a good beginning to addressing these issues, the learning community model, as developed in the Returning Woman's Program, has the added advantage of combining college success skills with academic courses that are managed by a collaborative team of faculty members who provide ongoing personal discussion and support.

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distance learners, and returning students all benefit from this program initiative.

Since on-site and Cyber-Orientation have been implemented, faculty and staff have observed that students are better prepared for the first day of class and their college experience. Attendance at workshops and utilization of support services such as tutoring and mentoring have increased 140%. Disciplinary referrals have decreased by 20%. Waiting times for advisement services during peak registration periods have been reduced by 25%. Students appear to have a better understanding of degree requirements and are more likely and able to self-advise. They are taking a greater interest in and more responsibility for their own academic choices, progress, and performance. Consequently, we expect they will experience greater success.

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April 7, 2000, Vol. XXII, No. 11

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Innovation Abstracts (ISSN 0199-106X) is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, SZB 348, Austin, Texas 78712-1293, (512) 471-7545. Periodicals Postage Paid at Austin, Texas. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Innovation Abstracts*, The University of Texas at Austin, SZB 348, Austin, TX 78712-1293. Email: sroueche@mail.utexas.edu