INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

ABOLISHING LATE REGISTRATION

Is your school like ours used to be? In the one or two weeks before school, do you have a frenzy of activity that overwhelms staff, generates long lines, and creates a sense of havoc among students? It has been the modern higher education method-of-choice to permit students to register almost whenever they wanted to do so. Sometimes, this has meant that we as institutions have established a series of registration periods, including a late registration period that might intrude into the quarter as much as one week.

At Sinclair Community College (SCC), we discovered that not only were we allowing conditions that fostered less than favorable conditions for student success, but we were implementing institutional policies to support them. One institutionalized policy was late registration, which had inherent inconsistencies.

After extensive research into the impact of late registration on student persistence and success, and the desire to help students start off on the right foot, SCC challenged its traditional ways of thinking to create a paradigm shift. In spring 2003, late registration opportunities were moved to the week before school began, and students were advised that they no longer would be allowed to register for a class that had already begun. As an institution, we decided that we wanted students in class—ready, willing, and able to learn from the very first day of class.

The road from thinking about it to actually doing it was long and not without a great deal of consternation. After all, as a community college, we prided ourselves on accessibility and the fact that any student could come to school at any time. What would this mean to us? What would the community think? Perhaps even more callously self-serving, what would this mean for enrollment or for receiving state subsidy? Would we see a significant drop in enrollment? Many on our staff were concerned that shifting registration and not allowing students to enter after a class had begun was a disaster waiting to be implemented.

However, we can tell you unequivocally that the world did not end in spring 2003, when we moved to this new paradigm. For the most part, not only did enrollment not go down, it actually went up. During spring, headcount increased 2.6%, and FTE increased 3.9%; fall term 2003, we experienced a 2.9% increase in headcount and a 4.7% increase in FTE over the previous fall quarter. For a college the size of SCC (23,588 students, fall 2003), that increase was significant. We learned several lessons that might be useful for colleges considering such a move.

First, the change actually will be easier than "getting your head around it." Most of us have worked in community colleges for all our adult lives, and we are accustomed to the workings of the traditional registration system. The individuals who will be the most difficult to convince that this is the right thing to do will be your own staff, not the students. Planned, strategic internal consensus building from the top down; marketing; and community involvement are essential.

Second, students comply with whatever institutional policy is presented to them. Our returning students easily moved to the new system, and new students did not know that anything but the current registration model ever existed. Consistent communication from all representatives of the college, multiple reminders in college publications, and numerous marketing materials were essential and cemented the changed thinking into the minds of all students.

Third, there are many benefits associated with this new procedure, including instructors teaching from day one; students not starting three or more days behind their fellow classmates and at an academic disadvantage; college offices that formally strained under the burden of thousands of last-minute students now finding that the pace is slower and that they are able to offer better service to all students. Sinclair has calculated that there are additional long-term benefits that result in improved student retention from quarter to quarter and improved reporting of enrollment data (resulting in increased subsidy).

Are there disadvantages? If there are, we have not seen them yet. We did mount a marketing effort to promote early registration, and we retrained ourselves to understand that a poor late registration practice in the

name of access was not necessarily good pedagogy. Should everyone do this? We think so. Will they? Probably not. They might believe it's the right thing to do, but they fear losing enrollment or worry that it limits access to higher education, just as we believed for so long. Actually, these rationales for not abolishing late registration fly in the face of what we know about a good start to the learning process. In today's educational environment, should we not be implementing practices and ideas that truly promote student learning and success? Allowing a student to register late, after a class has begun, is not good for learning or for student success.

Sinclair was fortunate enough to have a supportive president, committed collegewide support, and good economic conditions that promoted this positive, innovative model for higher education. We know that improving outcomes does not have to come at the expense of decreased enrollment. We invite you to join us in improving retention and completion rates across the country by becoming involved in success-oriented measures that create optimal learning environments.

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