



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## ENGAGING STUDENTS: STRATEGIES FOR CONNECTING HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES TO THEIR FIRST YEAR IN COLLEGE

Recently, a wonderful book was published about an anthropologist who temporarily left her role as university professor to study students' experiences during their first year at college. She did so by becoming a college student herself, taking a full-load and living in a dorm on campus. As a result of her fieldwork, she was able to identify the challenges students face, uncovering salient information about the factors that contribute to student persistence and success. According to the book's author, the most convincing criterion associated with student persistence was the experience of campus life, of being a part of the culture of a college. Of course, this is not new information to those of us who have studied successful strategies associated with retention and persistence. What the author emphasized and what we know intuitively is that engagement is the critical linchpin to success.

We also know that ensuring student connection with campus life is more challenging for community colleges. Our students live in the real world, their commitments to family and work competing with learning opportunities. Over the years, scholars in the field of higher education have pointed to the differences in students who enter college prepared for an education, with clear goals and a strong self-image, versus students who are unsure of their capabilities and undecided about their future.

What we have learned from our research is that the transition from high school to college is a critical period, a rite of passage for most students. Colleges that have been successful in retaining students, particularly at-risk students, have done so by developing comprehensive first-year experiences, finding ways to connect students in meaningful ways to campus life.

The *Freshmen Year Experience Program* (FYE) at San Diego Community College District, specifically Mesa

College, introduces strategies commensurate with student engagement, retention, and success; and collects and analyzes data supporting the success of these strategies. We describe it here.

### State-Supported Initiative

California community colleges are fortunate to receive state support to achieve their matriculation goals which are focused on the delivery of activities that ensure student persistence and success through support avenues such as orientation, admissions, counseling, assessment, and tracking. This support is evidenced by additional funds allocated to the colleges. For example, San Diego Community College District has received more than \$3M in 2008-09 to support its credit matriculation students. With this support, Mesa College has developed activities aimed at engaging students in their first year. The program is built on a foundation of successful partnerships with service-area high schools. To facilitate smooth transitions, the college hired high school counselors who connect early with potential students, developing specific activities to increase successful matriculation and track student success. The program is open to all incoming high school seniors; however, the primary target group consists of recent high school graduates enrolling in pre-collegiate courses.

### Components of the FYE Program

Once FYE students walk through the open door at Mesa College, they recognize that their journey will not be made alone. Using a cohort model, these students begin their matriculation process together by engaging in college-preparation activities such as applying for admissions and completing assessment tests. They receive one-on-one assistance in completing their admissions application, financial aid documents, and other pertinent forms; and take part in the critical orientation.

The orientation provides an overview of college programs and services; review of the catalog, class schedule, college vocabulary, basic college survival skills; and first-semester planning. At the conclusion of the orientation, all students meet with a counselor to identify their classes and build an educational



plan. The college offers parent orientations, known as “Dinner with Mesa,” to promote not only FYE but other programs and services to parents. “Financial Aid Nights” are held to promote financial aid packages available to students.

Students are required to enroll in English (reading and writing), math, college success skills, and general education courses. FYE students get priority registration, and our instructional partners set aside a specific number of seats in certain courses to ensure space for them. Learning communities include retention programs, many targeting African American and Latino students. Linking writing or math basic skills with personal growth courses broadens students’ educational experiences and ties critical life skills to learning.

Once the registration process is complete and class schedules are confirmed, students and their families are invited to participate in Student Success Day, scheduled two weeks before classes begin. The program includes student testimonials; a motivational speaker; roundtable question-and-answer sessions; and workshops on transfer, career planning, and financial aid. A student services fair is held at the conclusion of the workshops, with a barbeque, music, and prizes such as book grants and supplies. A one-stop enrollment services process is set up for schedule changes, immediate approval of financial aid fee waivers, issuing student identification cards, and purchasing books.

A critical component to program success is to create and nurture a teaching and learning environment that promotes faculty and student engagement. Faculty discuss the philosophy of FYE, the learning communities, and basic skills. Together, they identify a calendar of activities that promotes student and faculty engagement. Additional support includes tutoring, tracking and follow-up, participation in campus workshops and activities, and ongoing counseling and mentoring.

### **Evidence of Success**

Mesa College is committed to building a culture of evidence. And to that end, our district research office collects and analyzes data on all FYE students. Findings indicate that fall 2007 persistence rate for FYE students was 92.4%, as compared to 59.1% for all first-time freshmen; FYE students successfully completed their coursework at a rate of 92.4% for fall and 90.8% for spring, compared to 73.2% for fall and 73% for spring for all students.

Perhaps the most compelling data focused on the success of FYE students in their first semester of English and math. Successful completion of these core gatekeeper courses is vital to continued success. During fall 2007 semester, 86% of FYE students completed

their English and math courses successfully. Forty-four percent of these students used our tutoring services to enhance their learning. The completion rate in English and math for all first-time freshmen was 65.8%.

### **Lessons Learned**

Lessons learned through the first two years of the program center around better centralization of services, improvement of payment process, expansion of course offerings, and strengthening student and faculty engagement activities.

- Currently, when students request a schedule change, they meet with a counselor and then go to admissions to make the change. In order to create a more seamless process, they should have to visit only one office.
- Students did not understand that they would be dropped for nonpayment—subsequently, losing their class schedule of choice. We are developing a process of ensuring that students have ample time to pay and are able to maintain their original schedule.
- An intentional outcome was to have all FYE students enroll in college success skills and basic skills courses. An unintentional outcome was that we did not have the course capacity for non-FYE students, consequently limiting the number of general population students that were able to enroll in the foundational courses.
- We are committed to combining resources to provide a more comprehensive student development and professional development activity schedule.

### **Final Thoughts**

As did the anthropologist who set out to explore a new world as a freshman enrolled in college, we investigated the landscape. We have discovered some successful strategies for increasing the success and retention of first-year students; however, our work has just begun. Our focus always will be on engaging students, connecting them in meaningful ways to the world of higher education.

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