INCREASED RETENTION AND PERSISTENCE

Significant reduction in achievement gaps earns Valencia Community College the first annual Leah Meyer Austin Institutional Student Success Award from Lumina Foundation for Education

From the Leah Meyer Austin Award announcement

Valencia Community College has a long history of commitment to student success and attentiveness to under-prepared students. When it joined Achieving the Dream in 2005, the college had 100 different improvement programs under way, but admittedly had “dabbled” in the right things without demonstrating a large-scale commitment to specific student success strategies or to their analysis. Achieving the Dream provided the structure Valencia needed to dig deeper into its internal research data and focus its resources. By examining the intersection between its highest enrollment courses and those in which students were least successful, the college identified major achievement gaps across racial and ethnic groups; between college-ready and under-prepared students; and between adept mathematics students and those for whom mathematics courses were barriers.

Achieving the Dream came at the right developmental moment for Valencia, notes Susan Kelley, Vice President for Institutional Advancement, because the initiative’s “intentionality of institutionalizing right up front” set it apart from previous efforts and got the attention of all the college’s stakeholders.

The college used “Big Meetings” to share research, gather input, and work toward consensus on what strategies to pursue. The college-wide “Big Meetings” and smaller working groups continue to function as college personnel analyze results and respond to student performance data. Valencia’s leaders say Achieving the Dream’s requirement for collective decision making and detailed planning has fostered a disciplined process that is yielding better decisions and embedding student achievement goals and activities into the culture of the college.

To maximize the potential to improve students’ learning and success, several thousand faculty and staff members were asked to pick three strategies based on their effectiveness, scalability, and “ripeness.” “Ripeness” is Valencia President Sanford C. Shugart’s term for the programs that Valencia personnel knew to be effective with their students and that the college had the capability to implement across campuses and academic disciplines.

Valencia chose to focus its intervention strategies on three pre-college mathematics courses, an English composition course, a U.S. government course, and a college-level algebra course. The strategies for addressing these “high-risk courses” employ three arrangements of learning communities to cultivate student success. They were implemented in four phases beginning in the 2005-06 academic year.

Phase I

Supplemental Learning was added first to the three pre-college mathematics courses and then the other three courses that many incoming students find most difficult. Valencia hired successful students and educated them as peer mentors who sit in on the classes and offer voluntary class review sessions where students learn to work together to solve problems. The sessions help students learn both the course content and how to learn.
Phase II

Learning in Community (LinC) coordinates instruction in two difficult courses for students who attend the linked courses together. In most instances, the linked courses are one of the developmental mathematics courses and the three-credit Student Life Skills course that has a long record of improving student persistence. The block-scheduled courses are staffed simultaneously by two instructors and a success coach from the Student Services Department. The instructors and coach coordinate instructional activities and assessments. This supportive learning community provides students with the resources to become enabled, empowered learners.

Phase III

Valencia expanded the linked courses to include the composition, U.S. government, and college-level algebra courses with courses in other disciplines.

Phase IV

The college required students who test into the developmental courses in reading, writing, and mathematics to enroll in the Student Life Skills course, and also studied the possibility of mandating the Student Life Skills course for students who test into two of these developmental courses.

Results

By 2009, more than 29,000 Valencia students had taken at least one of the six gateway courses targeted by Achieving the Dream since 2005–2006. In general, students’ performance improved in all the courses. Hispanic students made particularly strong gains in the college-level algebra course and in two of the three developmental math courses, where they are performing better than Caucasian students on average. African American students are performing better than Caucasian students, on average, in the English composition course and as well as Caucasians in the college-level algebra and U.S. government course.

The college funded 80% of its Achieving the Dream work with its own resources, not grant funds, and intends to continue scaling up solutions that make the intended positive impact on students’ performance.

Cooperative Learning Leads to Increased Retention and Persistence:
Patrick Henry College, Martinsville, Virginia

From ATD’s Field Guide for Improving Student Success

With 3,300 students, Patrick Henry Community College (PHCC) serves rural residents in southcentral Virginia. The region has experienced tough economic challenges and high unemployment rates. One third of the college’s first-time, degree-seeking students are minorities, with 80 percent placing into developmental courses.

From the beginning, key institutional leaders were enthusiastic about participating in Achieving the Dream, and their enthusiasm rapidly spread. The analysis of the data collected by PHCC indicated that failing a developmental math course significantly diminished the likelihood of a student completing a certificate or degree. PHCC had also learned that slight increases in grade point averages improved the likelihood that students would complete their
educational goals. PHCC decided its priority focus would be on the first-year experience. A research and planning phase featuring a high level of faculty involvement led PHCC to adopt cooperative learning strategies.

PHCC offered faculty training on and off campus, and gave small stipends to participating faculty. Administrators built cooperative learning requirements into job descriptions for new faculty members and recently increased compensation for adjunct faculty members who participate in training.

The cooperative learning program adopted by PHCC is focused on two main elements: positive interdependence (in which each student is dependent on other students) and individual accountability (in which each student pulls his/her own weight within a group). These two elements were introduced via three main strategies:

- Base groups (comprised of 3–4 students grouped heterogeneously), which typically last the entire semester and are a source of mutual support
- Informal ad hoc groups of 2–4 students lasting anywhere from a few minutes to one class period
- Formal cooperative learning groups, which include 3–4 students working on a major project, presentation, or paper

The work has yielded results. PHCC found that the more classes students took where cooperative learning was used, the more likely they were to persist. PHCC reduced single-term dropout rates and increased the percentage of students enrolling in subsequent terms. Of students enrolled in two or more cooperative learning classes, 95 percent returned in the second year. Students enrolled in only one class where cooperative learning was implemented showed a spring-to-fall retention rate of 80 percent. By contrast, among students not enrolled in a class where cooperative learning was a major teaching strategy, nearly 25 percent left the college.

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**Data-based decision-making at Patrick Henry Community College, Martinsville, Va.**

From "Basics of Longitudinal Cohort Analysis" by Rick Voorhees and John Lee in the series Principles and Practices of Student Success

Patrick Henry Community College (PHCC) used data from pre–Achieving the Dream entering student cohorts as the foundation for its initial analysis of students’ needs and challenges. The college linked Achieving the Dream student cohort data with other data, such as information from student surveys and student placement tests, to conduct a deeper analysis of patterns of student success.

With the combined database, PHCC created a “persistence/success model” which it uses to identify characteristics of students who are likely to drop out, and to develop appropriate interventions that will lead to persistence and ultimately improve the odds of success for these students. The model takes into account a combination of social (e.g., economic status), demographic (e.g., race, gender, age), psychological (e.g., student motivation and attitudinal measures), and academic (e.g., math placement scores and cumulative GPA) factors that have been shown to contribute to student achievement. These variables were used to develop a risk score for all first-time, degree-seeking students in future fall cohorts (based on all variables that could be assessed in the first semester). The outcome for the first semester of PHCC’s 2007–08 Achieving the Dream cohort showed that the model was more accurate at predicting student persistence than any single piece of the information the college collects from students when they first enroll.
The model allowed the college to identify entering students who had particularly high-risk profiles and to assist these students with case management-based “intrusive mentoring” by specially trained faculty and staff. Students who participated in the mentoring program in fall 2007 showed slightly higher fall-to-spring persistence rates — about 5 percentage points better than the rates for a comparison group who did not receive the mentoring assistance. The college plans to continue monitoring the impact of the case management advising/mentoring model and make improvements accordingly.