Integrating Achieving the Dream and the Quality Enhancement Plan to Increase Momentum on Developmental Student Success: Wayne Community College, Goldsboro, N.C.

Wayne Community College began work on its Quality Enhancement Plan at the same time it started analyzing data and writing its Achieving the Dream implementation plan. The Achieving the Dream core team became convinced that the area of greatest need for improved student success at the college was developmental math. At the time of the proposal, 84 percent of entering students tested into at least one developmental course (78 percent in math). Only 62 percent of entering students who took these courses passed with a grade of C or higher. The success rates were lower for students in high-risk groups.

WCC discovered that by reorganizing and improving all entry points where new developmental students first made contact with the college, it could improve student success in a substantial way. The college decided to combine the funding, staff time, energy, and planning required for two major initiatives (the QEP and Achieving the Dream), thus ensuring a greater likelihood of success. This led the college to obtain the broad-based involvement and support from faculty and staff needed to make sweeping changes. The college split the position of vice president for instruction and student services into two separate positions, organized a consolidated developmental studies area at the college, established a transfer advising center, and improved student support services along the continuum from point of entry to being firmly established in classes (testing, academic skills center, developmental courses, college-level courses, and supplemental instruction). The college also purchased new computers and software (My Math Lab) for the math lab.

The college has an annual planning process where departments submit proposals for funding new initiatives, which are reviewed and prioritized by a committee according to the college’s areas of strategic emphasis. In this process, the college gives efforts related to Achieving the Dream or the Quality Enhancement Plan a higher priority for funding. Thanks to these efforts, over a three-year period, successful course completion for developmental math increased by between 11 and 14 percent, including for students identified as high-risk.

Defining Learning Outcomes to Increase Student Success in Gatekeeper Courses: Westmoreland County Community College (WCC), Youngwood, Pa.

Prior to Achieving the Dream, Westmoreland County Community college published a catalog description for each of its courses, but did not require a common course outline, syllabus, or set of learning outcomes. While faculty
received a suggested format for their courses, the content could be changed depending upon the individual interests, expectations, and strengths of the faculty member. When the college analyzed its data during its Achieving the Dream planning year, it discovered low success rates as measured by grades in many of its “gatekeeper” courses; that is, college-level courses that are required for graduation. It also began to understand that student outcome competencies varied greatly depending on who taught the course.

Faculty members concluded that to improve the success of students in gatekeeper courses and increase consistency in the competencies acquired, the learning outcomes that students must acquire to successfully complete each course had to be identified and aligned among the courses in every sequence. Thus, all students taking any course could be assured that they would receive instruction aimed at the same learning objectives and that at each step they would be prepared for the next course in the sequence.

The faculty began with English, reading, and mathematics courses. They came together in content groups to discuss placement test cut scores and the learning outcomes they expected for students in each course. Faculty worked on revising the placement test cut scores to better align with course content, then created a common course outline, syllabus, set of learning outcomes, and assessment to measure the learning outcomes in each course.

When learning outcomes assessment results were analyzed, faculty discovered that students were doing well on some objectives and having difficulty with others. In the process of analyzing student learning, they also learned that every faculty member had high student scores on some outcomes and lower scores on others. Faculty shared effective teaching strategies to improve student learning for those outcomes with lower scores. After the new course alignment was implemented, the college compared term-to-term retention rates with those from previous years, and found that retention had improved by between 1 and 7 percent, depending on the course.

In seeking to increase the number of students who successfully completed gatekeeper courses, WCCC identified and created an effective general process for improving student learning outcomes in the college’s general education core courses. WCCC was able to use its improved process not only to increase student success, but also to document a workable learning outcomes assessment process for its next round of accreditation.