Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count Initiative

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a multiyear national initiative to help more community college students succeed. The initiative is particularly concerned about student groups that traditionally have faced significant barriers to success, including students of color and low-income students.

INTRODUCTION

A key component of TCC’s work in the Achieving the Dream initiative is increasing our understanding of our students’ experiences. When we understand what helps or hinders students from realizing their educational goals, we can focus our efforts on the aspects that have the most impact on student success. The previous research briefs were based on data collected through the analysis of enrollment and course completion patterns for students in the Achieving the Dream cohorts. This brief, however, draws upon the responses shared by students and employees in nine focus groups held at the College during the 2007 Winter Quarter. This qualitative data—data that captures the perceptions and feelings of students—provides the context, or “story,” that helps us more clearly understand what the quantitative data on enrollment and completion patterns really means in increasing student success, especially for students of color and low-income students.

Six focus groups were held with 52 students in HD 101, developmental math and English courses, CASA, and Associated Student Government (ASG). The range of students included those who are new to TCC and are learning how to overcome barriers to success for students who have developed a stronger educational foundation at the College. Through an interactive, participant-driven process called Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA), these students were asked what makes a successful student. Responses were grouped by similar themes, and students then identified the relationships they felt existed between these different groups. Similarly, in an effort to better understand employee perceptions of systems that led to student success, three groups including faculty (7), staff (10), and administrators (17) participated in the same format. These groups were asked to describe what a best-practice institution serving at-risk students would look like. The results from the student focus groups were compiled into one model, while the results from the employee focus groups were combined into a second model. These two models—and how they relate to each other—are presented on the following pages.

TERMINOLOGY

QUANTITATIVE DATA: “Number” data—like student enrollment or course taking patterns—that can be analyzed statistically

QUALITATIVE DATA: Data that captures people’s perceptions and feelings; the “story” behind why things happen
STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT LEADS TO STUDENT SUCCESS: (Figure RB7.01)
The themes that emerged in the student focus groups were very similar, as were many of the relationships perceived by the students between categories. These themes and relationships were compiled into a composite model of student perceptions. As Figure RB7.01 depicts, students perceive that support from family and friends is the main influence on student success, directly impacting the financial resources that students can access and the academic and non-academic barriers they can overcome. When these barriers are removed, students view student support services as a pivotal link to persistence and success, empowering them to take advantage of services and to be responsible for their own learning. This empowerment leads to greater personal motivation. Additionally when students are involved in group interactions with other students and when they encounter innovative instruction, the final outcome—student understanding of course content—is achieved. The institution’s vision, procedures and structure—a secondary influence—also increases student success by enhancing student support services available to students.

Figure RB7.01: Cumulative Model of Student Focus Group Results on “What Leads to Student Success”

EMPLOYEE & COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF BEST PRACTICE INSTITUTIONS SERVING AT-RISK STUDENTS: (Figure RB7.02)
While there were many similarities in the perceptions of faculty, staff and administrators as to what a best-practice institution for student success would look like, there were also some differences. Staff and administrators saw innovative instruction as the driving force in a best-practice model, while faculty identified the college’s vision, procedures and structure as the primary driver. These two groups also felt professional development indirectly contributed to review and revisions to the college’s vision, procedures, and structure and to the creation of innovative instruction. A synergistic relationship between instruction, organizational structures and professional development leads to effective student support services and resources which ultimately drive the final outcome, successful student-institution relationship.
Comparing Students & Employee Perceptions: (Figure RB7.03)

As expected, there were similarities and differences in the perceptions of student and employee participants. Like the faculty group, students saw student financial resources as a strong driver of student success at the college. They also identified student support services as being crucial to their success—a relationship that was noted by all employee groups, as well. Students did not see a strong relationship between student support services and instruction, though employee groups did feel these two components were connected. Because employee groups were asked to focus on a best-practice institution, they did not identify the external components leading to student success—support of family and removing non-academic barriers—that students identified. However, the results from the employee groups also did not mention the students’ responsibility to take ownership for learning or the importance of student personal motivation, which were two components identified by the students.
BEST PRACTICE MODEL FOR SERVING AT-Risk STUDENTS: *(Figure RB7.04)*

The composite model of student and employee focus group results (Figure RB7.03) was used, in conjunction with quantitative data and secondary research to create TCC’s Best Practice Model of Serving At-Risk Students.

*Figure RB7.04: TCC Best Practice Model for Serving At-Risk Students*

The primary driver for the *TCC Best Practice Model for Serving At-Risk Students* is college vision, mission and goals, suggesting that how the college is organized and the strategic directions established determine the extent to which students have adequate support and resources to apply, register and persist at TCC. Innovative instruction and effective support services both contribute to successful student-institutional relationships. In this model, the primary outcome, student success, is realized when there is a balance between instruction, student support services and when the student is connected and engaged with the institution.