



LEADERSHIP ACADEMY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Pathways Project Implementation Memorandum

TO: Laura Rittner, Executive Director, Success Center – OACC
FROM: Amanda Ehman, Jason Gibson, David Shaffer, Elizabeth Kline
RE: Guided Pathways – Orientation and First-year Experience
DATE: September 2, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY/INTRODUCTION

Students across the nation are taking courses that do not apply to their program of study, which is resulting in increased student debt and time to degree completion. Coming into college, students are not focusing on career exploration and taking course that do not apply towards their end degree, while some students never complete. By examining the best practices in first-year experience courses, academic planning, and student orientation, the problems related to degree completion and student debt should improve.

RELEVANT LITERATURE REVIEWED

Based on the research, first-year programming appears to be common among two-year institutions in numerous forms with varying degrees of implementation. A national survey of two-year institutions by Alamuddin and Bender in 2018 found a variety of activities were popular in the first-year including: summer bridge programs, orientation, seminars/student success courses, advising/counseling, learning communities, and social support systems and networks. However, the survey determined that many first-year programs lacked mission-based programming for their students, such as transfer and career topics/services. They suffered from a lack of coordination and could benefit from oversight through one department and programming decisions based on research and data from within the institution (Alamuddin & Bender, 2018).

An example of an institution that has implemented three of the key first-year programming initiatives is Central Oregon Community College (COCC). COCC begins the students' journey with a pre-advising workshop where groups of 30 to 70 students come together to fill out an advising workbook. Afterwards, they meet in small groups with faculty to schedule their courses. The new student orientation is conducted the Friday before classes start with the focus of getting the students ready to step on campus on Monday and get through the first three weeks of classes. Finally,

all students are mandated to take a first-year experience course, which helps them succeed throughout the term with work on skill development and overcoming obstacles. The course is transferable throughout the Oregon system and carries 4.5 credits. COCC is currently in the process of adding career planning and advising and registration to their process (Sutton, 2018).

DATA EXAMINED

For the project, the project team dissected syllabi for orientation and first-year experience courses from each of the following institutions: Rio Grande Community College, Owens Community College, Lorain County Community College, and Zane State College. Common themes were pulled into one checklist to create a current look at practices at a variety of Ohio institutions. The common themes included:

Orientation

- Next steps in the enrollment process
- An overview of the different services offered at the institution
- An overview of the student portal
- Financial obligations and financial aid

First-year Experience Course

The course consists of three main areas: Academic Planning Career Exploration, and Holistic Student Supports.

Academic Planning

- Create an academic plan that will lead to achievement of academic goals and career decision which will reduce time to degree completion.

Career Exploration

- Provide the student with knowledge of business career options by integrating career assessment results, labor market research and personal reflection to identify an appropriate career path.

Holistic student support – Behaviors and Skills

- Provide success strategies and resources necessary for reaching college and life goals such as power skills including but not limited to, emotional intelligence, self-monitoring, and interpersonal communications.
- Develop effective learning styles, study, time management and problem solving skills and strategies to promote student and career success.
- Describe the availability of college resources and general technology effectively and appropriately.

- Enhance the students understanding of financial literacy.
- Culture Diversity

PROPOSED CHANGES/REFORMS TO BE ADOPTED

Problem

Students may enter college without knowing what resources are available, which can lead to excess credits and extend the amount of time to completion. Some of those tools include career advising and assessment, as well as, academic advising. In addition to excess credit hours, issues arise with financial aid, such as over-borrowing. Students may not know these tools exist or fail to take advantage of the tools and skip right to registering for classes. There are many different ways to address the challenges presented, but it starts with a sound new student orientation and first-year experience course.

Proposed Changes

When designing new student orientation, institutions need to keep in mind that the orientation is to assist with getting students started on the essential next steps to enrollment prior to starting classes. This would include how to pay a bill, completing a FAFSA, an overview of the student portal, next steps in the enrollment process, and an overview of the different services offered at the institution. The enrollment process should include a mandatory meeting with their advisor. When designing a first-year experience course, the institution needs to include academic planning, career assessment, and study skills. Focusing on these topics in the first-year experience course will ensure the student is dedicating adequate time and utilizing the decision-making tools planning their career and education. The institution should require both, new student orientation and the first-year experience course.

Timeline

Implementation timelines for the recommended changes will vary by institution. For new student orientation, an in-person and online orientation can be designed in three months. To start, a group consisting of student services stakeholders led by admissions should be created and meet on a weekly basis. The group will lay out a list of key items orientation should cover. Orientation should take between 30 to 60 minutes to complete, ensuring the student completes the orientation without it being an enrollment barrier. The first-year experience course will take more time to implement. A group of student services stakeholders, faculty, and academic department leads should be created and meet on a weekly basis. Course objectives and student learning outcomes will need to be created and then moved through the college's

curriculum process. Due to approval, 36 months should be planned for the implementation of the course. It would be ideal to roll out the changes effective the start of a new academic year, as this will assist with measuring the success of the changes.

Measuring Success

Success of the changes above are measured in a number of ways. First, the institution should measure the amount of credits attempted to complete a degree. If the first-year experience course is working correctly, the average number of credit hours attempted by students prior to earning a degree should decrease. Another measurement of success would be the rate of graduates per enrollees, which should increase. Using the rate of graduates per enrollees will allow for the fluctuation of increases and decreases in enrollment. Measuring the overall retention rate to the next semester as well as the next year will also provide insight as to the effectiveness of the orientation and first-year success combo. In addition, another option is to look at the relationship between the grade in the first-year experience course and the student's overall GPA for the first semester as well as cumulative. Lastly, the institution should measure the amount of major changes students are initiating after 30 credit hours of coursework. The number of changes should decrease if the student is receiving career advising and assessment at the beginning of their educational journey. All measurements will be done among three-year cohorts.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Faculty and Staff

A challenge that an institution could face when implementing a new direction for first-year experience courses or orientation is explaining why the change is necessary. Resources are scarce and college faculty, staff, and administration have already exhausted a large amount of energy implanting changes. Initiative fatigue is a reality that touches every institution for faculty and staff. An institution could mitigate this challenge by providing staff and faculty training for anyone that is interested. This will help to install a growth mindset rather than a fixed mindset. Trainings would allow staff and faculty to see the benefits of developing these changes in the first-year experience course and orientation. Using data driven research in these trainings to show the benefits of the focus on academic planning, career exploration and holistic student support – behaviors and skills in the first-year experience course and orientations would be used as motivation. Retention of students provides a value to the institution and these initiatives. Communication issues within academic programs could also prove to be a challenge. Building meaningful relationships between peers, faculty, academic and career development throughout the course is vital in the success for students.

Students

How can students be expected to make career decisions at 18? Don't students change careers four to seven times? Students that enter college and plan on two-year degrees benefit from early access to tools used in the first-year experience course. It is proposed that this model actually prepares students to both enter the workplace with clarity and the knowledge needed to facilitate career advancement over time. The programs and activities in these courses would be designed specifically to promote retention as well as implemented goals throughout the course and orientation.

Specific to the first-year experience course, defining who the targeted population is to take this course is another challenge that colleges may face in implementing this at the college. Institutions must clearly define eligible first-year students to take the course. Based on first-time first-year status, looking at the number of college level courses the student may be transferring in or their level of college readiness based on achievement can help an institution define this population that they wish to target. Getting student buy-in especially adult students would be another challenge, institutions must make the course relevant to adult students as well and show why it is important to them. Examples of building a career portfolio to develop a professional resume and preparing students with interviewing skills would resonate value to adult students.

A challenge many colleges face is making orientation mandatory or making it optional. Orientation, paired with first-year-experience courses has proven to increase retention and build a sense of social community for students beginning college. Creating a belonging to a college has shown to contribute to student success and retention. A college must develop an orientation to cover topics that help students feel that sense of acclamation to a college. Requesting faculty and staff input on orientations, paired with the first-year experience course will guide in giving students information and the support they need to be successful.

CONCLUSION

By implementing full program plans for students that are based on requisite career exploration within a full-bodied orientation and first-year experience program, students will be on an entrance ramp to a guided pathway. This includes orienting students to the college with a tailored orientation that focuses on basic information needed to start on the right path partnered with developing a mandatory first-year experience course that has a high focus on career exploration and holistic student supports. These combined initiatives will address the problems related to excessive credits and degree completion that students across the nation face.

REFERENCES

Alamuddin, R. and Bender, M. (2018 September 26). The first-year experience in two-year public postsecondary programs: Results of a national survey. Ithaca SR.

Sutton, H. (2018 December 18). Set your students up for success with integrated first-year experience. *Student Affairs Today*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/say.30553>