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Mandatory & Increasingly Robust College Success Courses for Sustained Impact:

What does the research data say?

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The evidence does suggest that both student orientation and first-year college success courses are associated with increased student engagement and improved outcomes (Hanover Research, 2014). Many students are unclear about their educational objectives; and while the community colleges do require some form of orientation and assessment, many colleges do not require in-person orientation or student success courses for incoming freshman (SSTF, 2012).

Review of the Literature

Using quantitative and qualitative analysis, Karp, Raufman, Efthimiou and Ritze (2015) of the Community College Research Center, found an association between the redesigned student success course in the New York community college system and positive student outcomes; additionally, outcomes were sustained for longer periods of time compared to traditional college success courses that do not offer a focus on student-centered pedagogy and integrated course content. Within the context of a student success course, when students are afforded the opportunity to practice success skills, those student are more likely to apply those skills during their future educational pathway, likely improving their long-term educational outcomes toward completion. There is emerging research consensus that there are particular principles critical for student success in college, and a strong start is one of them.

It is imperative to focus attention on fostering engagement and personal connections during the first weeks' of a student's college adventure. Research shows that in-person college orientations and student success courses are 2 of the 13 promising practices that lead to higher student satisfaction and improved retention of at-risk students (CCCSE, 2012). Within the student success course, the majority of the remaining 13 promising practices can be covered such as academic goal setting when planning for success and class attendance with experiential learning beyond the classroom for sustaining success.

Key Required Components for Effective Implementation and Characteristics.

Typical components of student success courses include note-and test-taking strategies, interpersonal communication skills, goal setting and time management strategies (Hanover Research, 2014). Ideally, a college introduction and success course would include intensive advising to assist and ensure students choose a path and take the right courses (Bailey, Jaggars and Jenkins, 2015).

At Tidewater Community College in Norfolk, VA, their First Year Success program requires both orientation and the selection of one mandatory student development course. The three success courses students can choose from are: College Success Skills; Orientation to the discipline in which you are enrolled; or College Survival Skills. Tidewater students are required to take the Student Development course within their first 15 credit hours of study if they are working toward an associate degree or certificate (www.tcc.edu/firstyearsucces).

The research of Karp et al. (2015) found that when college success courses are redesigned to also include teaching and learning applications for knowledge transfer and deeper learning, the student outcomes are positive and appear to be sustained for a longer period of time than that of traditional student success courses. Redesigned student success courses are increasingly including a more robust focus on helping the student to choose a program of study within the success course or first semester to accelerate their pathway to completion. Students who enter a program of study within the first two semesters have an increased likelihood to complete their certificate, degree or transfer within five years than do students in a comparison group who did not enter a program of study until their second year or later (Jenkins & Cho, 2012).

Examples.

- The City University of New York (CUNY) first piloted the START Program in 2009 with the goal of helping students gain proficiency in basic skills in order to minimize the amount of coursework that unprepared students must complete at the remedial levels. CUNY offers students who fail assessment tests the option to defer matriculation (enrollment in a degree program) in order to maintain eligibility for re-assessment by attending and participating in the intense and heavily structured program. Full-time START program students receive instruction in BOTH reading/writing and math in addition to a college success component. The START Program is a total of 15-18 weeks, 25 hours per week for the full-time program. Additional assessment is given to students after the first 12 week phase of core instruction followed by 3 – 6 weeks of instruction as needed and another assessment. Summer START is 8 weeks. This is a transitional pre-enrollment program that allows students to reserve their financial aid for credit coursework which leads to completion.

Five years of CUNY data shows that students who complete START have significant skill gains, and are better prepared for credit courses. Once CUNY START students do begin a degree program, they attempt and earn more credits than comparison group students after one semester. START students have higher GPAs and are retained at higher rates.

- Brazosport College (TX) began requiring all first-time-in-college students to take a college success course titled Learning Frameworks (LF) in the Fall of 2007. The LF course focuses on developing and strengthening personal and academic skills, as well as goal setting. Students in the 2007-2009 cohort who successfully completed the LF course had an average Fall-to-Spring retention rate of 89% compared to a baseline of 66% (CCCSE, 2012). Also in Texas at Houston Community College, all first time students who have achieved less than 12 college level hours are required to take a student success course their first term (www.hccs.edu/gcac/sscourse).
- Durham Technical Community College (NC) began requiring all first-time college students to attend a pre-enrollment orientation AND to enroll in a college success course in 2006. The college now has research data for four (4) cohorts demonstrating improved persistence each year. The 2007 cohort first-to-second semester persistence rate was 73%, while the 2010 cohort persisted into the second semester at a rate of 89%. Nearly 9 in 10 students persisted in 2010 (CCCSE, 2012).
- At the Maryland Community College of Beaver County, all new students have been required to take a free First Year Seminar college success course for the past three years. This intervention provides a comprehensive approach to improve success rates and increase retention including content to empower students to become active, accountable learners. In collaboration with this course, the institution provides a 3-credit release every term for a faculty member to ensure a consistent high-quality delivery of instruction in all sections of the success course (www.achievingthedream.org/intervention, 2015).

Methodology

The researcher for this literature review research brief found seven publications and three community college specific websites focused on researching or discussing research results for requiring college success courses. A thorough review was conducted of publications that were peer reviewed, studies released by research entities such as the Research and Planning (RP) Group for California Community Colleges, Community College Research Center (CCRC), Hanover Research and the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE), or articles published discussing the applicable research of mandatory college success courses. Review of literature produced recurring themes noting the longer term sustained impact for students who were required to take college success courses early in their educational pathway. Findings and conclusions for this research brief are drawn from the conclusions of the literature reviewed.

Findings and Conclusions

While mandatory college success courses may impose additional burdens on students with demanding schedules, the courses do ensure that all students are informed about institutional organization as well as time management and goal setting strategies (Hanover Research, 2014).

In many roadmap to completion programs at community colleges across the nation, in-person orientation along with college success courses are required for students to start their college experience with strengthened student engagement benefitting from ongoing innovative intervention strategies for longer-term impact. The extant of literature studying redesigned student success courses is in agreement that the courses must provide students with exposure to key skills and knowledge. Students must be given opportunities to practice key skills and students must access and use their skill and knowledge in new contexts (Karp, et. al., 2015). Initial pilot strategies may draw from the CUNY START 8-week summer programs as an example. The college success courses should be mandatory for those students receiving additional incentives such as the community college promise programs that provide first semester and first-year free tuition, or remedial math immersion. Academic planning should include not only course selection, but also program identification and long-term planning as early as possible during students' first year (CCCSE, 2012). To resolve the additional burden to students during the regular fall and spring semesters, robust summer college success courses running 8 – 10 weeks would be the ideal implementation opportunity to provide all of the above identified priority intervention strategies.

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