



The Career College Information Source

Maximizing Your Initiatives for At-Risk Students: Making Your Resources Count

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While student concerns for successful graduation, career placement and even job security are well documented, assisting students in negotiating their school and career paths can be quite challenging for campus leaders, faculty and staff. Given the demographics and issues of today's adult college students, traditional graduation metrics involving first-time, full-time students completing their degrees within 150 percent of the typical time to degree are woefully inadequate to capture either the challenges or the successes of these students. The most recent Signature Report of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, which tracked student persistence to graduation, included students who transferred to other schools. A total of 37.8 percent of career college students persisted through to graduation at their original institutions. Another 4.9 percent transferred to and graduated from another career college, for a total 42.7 percent student graduation rate at the schools in the study.¹ So, what can a campus do to help the other 57.3 percent to be successful?

Student Risk Factors

Students encounter a variety of difficulties and obstacles as they progress through their programs. An important first step in assisting students is for campus leaders to understand the specific risk factors and success barriers their students face. In the most

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recent report of the National Survey of Student Engagement², fully a third of student respondents from a variety of postsecondary colleges reported that financial concerns had interfered with their academic performance and approximately three quarters of the respondents maintained that college is a good investment for them.

However, another study of a thousand individuals aged 18 to 45, 30 percent of whom were currently unemployed, indicated a new calculus in judging the costs and benefits of a career college education. The majority of respondents expressed concerns about the expense of going to school in the face of their skepticism about their likelihood of obtaining suitable employment once a

certificate or degree was earned. They said they would be more likely to go to school once the economy turned around, a total reversal of historical trends, namely, increased enrollment during periods of economic dif-

ficulty.³ This perspective is quite understandable as students and their families face the reality that college costs have risen 400 percent in the last 25 years while median family income increased less than 150 percent, and in challenging economic times, many college students are paying for college themselves.⁴

While it may be that female students have more serious emotional problems, it is also quite possible that the females were more willing to disclose their issues to college faculty and staff in order to obtain assistance in dealing with these problems.

Sometimes students deal with their financial challenges by working more hours or seeking more loans, to the detriment of their educational and career success. Additional analyses of data from the National Center for Educational Statistics found that 45 percent of students in four-year college programs and 60 percent of community college students worked more than 20 hours a week. A quarter of the community college students worked more than 35 hours a week⁴; by contrast, a recent report indicated that 73 percent of enrolled career college students were working at least part-time.⁵

A variety of risk factors may be present in the student population of any given campus, and sometimes a student's most compelling challenge is balancing competing work, family and school responsibilities. To obtain a more complete picture of the risk factors encountered by career college students, we analyzed data from our database of students served by Student Resource Services (SRS) during the 2008–2009 and 2011–2012 school years. Student Resource Services provides counseling, life coaching and community



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Dr. Monroe-Posey is a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Air Force, and has many years' experience focusing on student success from both practical and research perspectives—starting as an eighth-grade math teacher.



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are available to students 24/7/365 to help them with their personal challenges so that they can stay focused on completing their studies.

Caroline received her bachelor's degree from the University of Colorado, and her master's degree in business administration from Saint Louis University.

Caroline brings to her SRS role her insights gained with her teaching experiences in the United States and abroad.

resource referrals to students at a wide range of career colleges. For each year group, we compared the problems identified by our licensed, master’s-level counselors for the students who voluntarily called in for services versus the students who were formally referred for assistance by college faculty or staff members. The results are presented in the table below.

The average age of the students served in 2008–09 was 28.8 years, while in the 2011–12 group, it was slightly older at 29.8. Forty percent of the students in both groups were between the ages of 19 and 26 while 32 percent were aged 27 through 35. Generally, almost 80 percent of the students served were female; however, 41 percent of the students formally referred during the 2011–2012 school year were male. In general, the students served in 2011–12 appeared to have fewer serious emotional problems than the 2008–09 group, where one in five exhibited serious emotional problems. It is interesting to note that the group with the highest proportion of serious emotional problems were those

formally referred by campus faculty and staff during the 2008–09 school year, which was also the formal referral group that had the higher proportion of females. While it may be that female students have more serious emotional problems, it is also quite possible that the females were more willing to disclose their issues to college faculty and staff in order to obtain assistance in dealing with these problems.

A total of 42 percent of the 2008–09 students and 33 percent of the 2011–12 students were identified as having mental health, substance abuse, relationship issues or health concerns. While it may be tempting to conclude that the 2011–2012 student population seeking our services was emotionally healthier than the 2008–09 group, it is also possible that the proportion of identified daily life needs and other stressors increased as the recession deepened between 2008–09 and 2011–12. Such needs and other stressors accounted for 49 percent of the problems identified in the 2008–09 group of students and 55 percent of the problems in the 2011–12 student group. The high proportion of students with emotional

	2008 – 2009			2011 – 2012		
	Self-Referrals	Formal Referrals	All Students	Self-Referrals	Formal Referrals	All Students
Sample Demographics						
Average age	29	27	28.8	30	27	29.8
Gender – Male	21%	28%	22%	26%	41%	27%
Gender – Female	79%	72%	78%	74%	59%	73%
Types of Problems Identified	Self-Referrals	Formal Referrals	All Students	Self-Referrals	Formal Referrals	All Students
Alcohol or Drug (Self or Family Members)	2%	4%	2%	1%	4%	2%
Health, Mental Health or Relationship Issues	39%	45%	40%	31%	32%	31%
Daily Life Needs (e.g., Utilities, Transportation)	40%	22%	38%	45%	19%	43%
Other Stressors (Work, Legal, Military)	11%	7%	11%	13%	7%	12%
Specific School Problems	7%	22%	8%	10%	39%	12%
Students with Serious Emotional Problems	20%	32%	21%	12%	21%	12%

and behavioral problems highlights the importance of having resources available to assist students dealing with such issues.

It is not surprising that the two groups of students who were formally referred for our services had the highest proportion of specific school problems. These school issues cover a full range of problems from attendance and

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academic performance to behavioral problems and externship fit/performance. At the time a formally referred student is first assessed, our counselor considers the

information provided by the referring school official as well as the information provided by the student, which may increase the proportion of students identified to have specific school performance issues. With student permission, the referring school official receives limited information on the student's participation in and progress through the counseling and coaching services provided by SRS.

Our students choose to attend career colleges specifically to obtain the training and credentials they need in order to embark successfully on their chosen career paths. They have all the advantages of specific career goals, and programs tailored to give them the knowledge, skills and experience they need to be successful in their chosen careers; and yet the variety and complexity of challenges and barriers to success that they face can be particularly daunting for them and the campus faculty and staff who serve them. So, what can a campus team do to assist students to be successful?

Campus Initiatives and Approaches that Promote Student Success

Upon implementing any new programs or initiatives, it is imperative to identify who will be involved, their roles, and how the process will be communicated. No matter what your goals are with a new initiative, if the goals and intentions are not clearly communicated to all involved starting from the leadership down through the organization, chances for success become limited. It is important to be deliberate with every step and to outline an appropriate time frame not only to implement the initiative, but to carry it out and integrate it into your campus structure, programs and culture.

As part of any program or initiative to assist at-risk students, early identification of potential barriers for students is one of the first steps a campus team can take. Assessing a student's needs starts during the enrollment period when an admissions representative learns what is motivating an adult student to go back to school. This is also an opportunity to learn about any challenges the student is hoping to overcome by furthering their education. During this process it is

Student Resource Services

Since 1991, Student Resource Services has provided coaching and counseling services to colleges and universities wishing to retain more students, reduce legal and liability risks, support accreditation, and provide students with the support that they need to be successful.

SRS licensed counselors work with college students through multiple programs and technology channels so they stay connected to their goals – and help schools meet their student retention goals.

SRS outcome studies have demonstrated that their customized programs can increase start rates by up to 14 percent; help at-risk students served to persist in school an average of a semester longer; and increase campus graduation rates by as much as 11 percent.

important for the admissions team to share and identify the campus resources available to assist the student with any of these challenges during their time in school. As students transition into school it is important for campus faculty and staff to establish rapport with new students and to build appropriate professional relationships that allow students to talk openly about their potential barriers, creating opportunities for faculty and staff to again share the resources available at the campus to assist students with various needs. These resources can include the library, tutoring, financial aid, accessibility of instructors, and available counseling support. For this engagement and helping process to be effective, faculty and staff need the capacity to build trust and to communicate effectively with students.

As part of the early identification process it is crucial to reinforce *every term* with faculty the importance of their roles in student retention because not all potential barriers are identified or present during enrollment. Faculty members are on the front line and often are the first to identify possible risk factors. When training your faculty it is important to review behaviors that could indicate possible risk factors, including, but not limited to, frequent absences, declines in performance, changes in participation, atypical behaviors in class or on campus, and undue sharing of personal struggles. It is also critical to give faculty members ideas on approaching students when they notice one or more of these behaviors, including the use of open-ended questions. These skills will strengthen your team's ability to identify and approach students to understand their issues, and discover any underlying concerns.

When a faculty member or any other staff member notices any concerning

student behavior, it is important to connect with the student to identify ways you or another resource on campus may be able to assist them. Continual reminders and suggestions encourage students to take advantage of the campus resources available. If a concerning behavior continues, follow up with a student to see what steps, if any, they have taken to

work through their concern(s). This is an opportunity for faculty to coach students on next steps and let the student know they

will follow up with them to see how the resource they accessed was able to assist them. It may be necessary to involve others on campus to be part of this support effort with your student, such as the dean of education, an advisor or student services representative. Of course, involving other campus staff and resources requires a detailed understanding of the campus services available, the roles of campus staff in helping students, and good communication among those involved. As the barriers and challenges that students face are quite often daunting and multifaceted, following up with the student is critical. This key behavior in the helping process lets the student know you are concerned; it can open the door to the student coming to you in the future if they need help, and it is a positive reflection on your school and its desire to help students succeed.

In addition to faculty support, it is important to meet regularly as a campus team to discuss at-risk students. In these meetings faculty and staff members can identify specific behaviors they are seeing regarding these at-risk students. Discuss the steps that have been taken to help the student. From

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there put together an action plan for working with the student that is appropriate to the student's identified needs and personal style. The goal is to empower the student to develop their own plan to resolve their issues. The student will be reliant on your knowledge of different campus resources that can be combined to help the student work through their challenges. A

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student's action plan may include 2 or 3 critical steps. For example, suppose you have a student, John, who is struggling academically. As an instructor this is an opportunity to approach John to see if he is having any trouble with the material and if there are ways you can help. John shares that he is distracted because he is going through a divorce and is worried about custody issues and how things will work out with his children. After John shares this information, it is important to offer appropriate concern, and discuss with John his goals for resolving the situation and possible actions he could take. This may involve identifying what resources on or off campus are available to assist him. Because John is struggling with

his course work, he might find it helpful to have each of his instructors do weekly checks to ensure all work is completed or require John to prepare a study guide before every exam to enhance his preparation. Another step would be to connect John with counseling support available at the campus to provide him the opportunity to talk about his relationship issues and any fears he may have. If John is sufficiently distressed about his situation, an immediate referral to a mental health counselor may be required before any useful action planning can occur. Students with serious mental health issues may need urgent intervention services, available 24/7, or even psychiatric evaluation for the use of medications. Even if John's situation involves serious mental health issues, your following up with him is an important part of the action plan in order to maintain your relationship of trust, to track his progress and to help him stay focused on resolving his issues.

When implementing programs and other initiatives to support your identification of at-risk students, consistency is key. Whether using current resources or adding new programs or resources, make sure from a leadership perspective that the values of the program, along with its goals, have been shared with everyone on campus. Invest sufficient time and resources to allow the program to evolve and become more effective in meeting its goals. And, just as with students, ongoing reminders and check-ins to evaluate how the program is progressing or how faculty and staff are using the resources is critical. It is also important to gather student feedback, both anecdotal and through surveys, to obtain additional perspectives on your program or initiative.

National Forum on Career Success

As a member of the National Forum on Career Success (NFoCS), Dr. Carla Monroe-Posey joins other professionals from the education sector focused on student success.

Founded in 2007 by Janet Mug, NFoCS seeks to identify and communicate the most effective strategies employed in higher education for positioning student-customers for academic and career success.

To learn more visit www.nfocs.org or contact Gary Carlson, president of NFoCS at gary@garycarlson-inc.com.

Putting It All Together

It is clear that the challenges of at-risk career college students are varied and complex, and that the programs and interventions to assist these students are resource intensive and require a deliberative development process. Such a development process starts with targeting key at-risk groups, and creating effective outreach efforts and programs to meet their needs. These programs require a well trained, cohesive campus team collaborating to implement, measure and improve programs they truly embrace. The support of campus and school leadership is therefore key in ensuring the right programs have the resources and time needed to develop their effectiveness in supporting at-risk students in their persistence to graduation and career success.



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