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Student Retention: The Efforts Begin at Admissions

When we think of retention few of us envision admissions, registration, and orientation, but this is where it all starts. In fact, those first few steps can be the most intimidating for students. Creating seamless processes that keep students engaged and encouraged is vital to getting them into the classroom and oriented to college. As we explore the intricacies of retention, ensuring that students feel supported and guided in these processes is a valuable investment in retention.

The first step is admissions and onboarding. Five years ago the College implemented an advising questionnaire to be completed before a student registers for classes. The questions are designed to help the College guide their academic journey and connect them with an advisor. Asking students to share their academic, career, and life goals not only helps the College to serve them better, but it pushes them to create a plan. Many of our students have not been asked to make long term plans in their lives so, taking this step in a supportive environment increases the chances that they will be able to succeed along an academic pathway.

Academic orientation teaches students about MC degree requirements, how to select their courses, and map out their educational pathway at MC. Students also receive their results on their Accuplacer or Accuplacer ESL exam and learn what their initial course placements are in English and/or math, and how those placements determine the courses they can take in their first semester.

New student orientation (NSO) is another important experience for students. Mandatory for first time degree-seeking and certificate-seeking students NSO can be done in person or online. NSO helps students learn



about resources at the college and activities that can connect them to other students at the college. Both of these outcomes have been shown to improve retention.

Registering on time for classes was the focus of an initiative begun in 2015. Because students who register late are more likely to miss several classes, they lose important initial academic guidance in classes, syllabus-review, and bonding with instructors and other students. Eliminating these risks by requiring registration on time, students are set up better for success in individual classes.

A part of enrollment services that is rarely seen by students is the work that goes into updating Banner. What does that mean? As you know, the College's curriculum committee works diligently to ensure that any changes that are need to the content of course work are approved and implemented in a timely manner. With the College's firm commitment to ensuring up-to-date academic and workforce development standards, the content of courses has to be altered at times. Additionally, enrollment services keeps an eye on changes to assessment levels of courses. At times the prerequisite score for entering a specific course has to be changed (on the ACT or the Accuplacer), and these changes must be integrated into Banner. The input of disciplinary experts here has to be combined with the activity of curriculum committee reviews and translated into proper Banner changes. The whole purpose of these exercises is to ensure that students are being exposed to course content that best serves their learning and connects appropriately with workforce needs.

Research on community colleges often highlights developmental education as a barrier to success. Students often drop out of development education because of cost. Some use up too much of their federal financial aid on these noncredit classes while those who pay out of pocket sometimes get discouraged by costs and their chances for completion. Alternative placement programs have been developed in math and English so that students who place in developmental courses based on their test scores can be placed into credit-bearing courses based on other means, such as performance in certain high school courses. This helps them psychologically to feel that they are making progress and saves them money. Several pilots have also been run in which students who are non-native English speakers are allowed to register for certain credit classes while they improve their English in the highest English Language for Academic Purposes (ELAP) class. This co-registration has been used in courses for which full English may not be essential due to the



scientific nature of the content—chemistry, for example, along with computer applications and engineering science. Moving students along in credit course work has been shown to improve their likelihood of staying engaged and focused on their goals; in other words, retention.

Course scheduling is another area in which critical work is being done to improve retention. Enrollment services has been working diligently with Academic Affairs to review when and where courses are offered. Assessing where additional sections need to be offered, at what times is important for students' progress. If they can't get the courses they need when they are free of constraints such as work or childcare, they are more likely to leave school. Ad Astra, the new software purchased by the College, is helping us make recommendations to add or remove sections. The long term goal is to be able to offer a three-year schedule to an entering student, so that he/she can make plans for work, transportation, childcare, or other obligations. Ad Astra, via the Curriculum Advising and Program Planning (CAPP) module in our student information system, can see the number of registered majors and how many seats will be needed in required courses, so extrapolating that to a three-year schedule is the next step in this important retention tool.

A retention topic closely related to course scheduling is financial aid. As you know, federal financial aid funds only pay for courses that are in a student's course program of study (CPOS). Enrollment services has to set up the CAPP correctly so that students can get access to their funds. Since students will sometimes register for classes that are not in their CPOS, they have to be contacted and counseled about the process. We are working towards getting a system that will automatically block students from registering for classes not in their program of study, which should save student and personnel time. The fewer mishaps like this, the more likely students are to experience smooth registrations and progress towards their goals.

Transfer students have slightly different needs than other students, since they are generally bringing credits that they want to apply to an MC degree. How quickly and accurately MC evaluators can make assessments about the transferability of course work directly impacts whether students stay. The College has a transfer credit evaluator on each campus to ensure that this process is efficient. Keeping students who might go elsewhere with their credits is an important retention strategy.

As you can see, retention work goes on long before students enter the classroom. Setting them up for success with on-time registration and new student orientation increases their chances of



completion. Making sure that they do not languish in developmental education and lose sight of their goals is another. Helping students to use their financial aid dollars wisely and take advantage of alternative placement programs and transfer credits keeps them moving forward. These are all components of retention that take place very early in the student support process. The College is working diligently to maximize the impact of each of these components. Creating processes that are efficient and accurate is vital to the success of enrollment services and to students' likelihood of remaining in college.

