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ABSTRACT

Valencia Community College in Florida developed a holistic approach to improve student retention during the period October 1987 through September 1992. Two of the major thrusts of the retention project were the development of an extended orientation course about student success (SLS 1122) and the development of a faculty mentoring program. Study findings on the short- and long-term effects of these two strategies included the following: (1) students enrolled in SLS 1122 passed their courses for that term at a rate of 81%, compared to rates of 56% for students enrolled in other college prep courses and 67.2% for all other students; (2) SLS 1122 students had a next-term return rate of 78%, compared to 67% for college prep enrollers and 57.6% for all other students; (3) students enrolled in SLS 1122 enrolled at a rate of 65% after 4 terms, 48% after 7 terms, and 30.4% after 11 terms; compared with rates of 50%, 33%, and 20% for a similar group of degree seekers over the same time periods; and (4) students enrolled in SLS 1122 also attempted a greater number of hours. To expand participation in the student success course and the mentor program, incentives must be offered to recruit more faculty mentors; department chairs will have to be willing to assign more faculty to teach student success; the program will have to be changed so that mentors work with students for only one semester; and the students will need to produce an educational plan at the end of the first semester of participation. (KP)

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The Effect of SLS 1122 and Faculty Mentors
on Student Performance

by Ron Nelson

February 24, 1993

Introduction

Valencia Community College, assisted by a Title III Strengthening Institutions grant from the United States Department of Education, developed a holistic approach to improving student retention during the period October 1987 through September 1992. The project comprised four major thrusts: development of a new student information system and linkage of faculty and staff with the mainframe and with each other through a voice-over-data telephone network; faculty training and development in student learning abilities and skills, computer use, and mentoring skills; the development of an extended orientation course (SLS 1122); and development of a mentoring program.

Of course, other retention initiatives were underway at the same time as the Title III Retention Project, but during that five-year period, college-wide retention improved by several measures presented in the College-wide Indicators Report (IR93-10) issued January 15, 1993.

First, the college-wide Session 1-to-Session 2 return rate for first time in college students improved from 56% in Fall 1987 to 65% in Fall 1991. Similarly, the graduation rate for all self-declared degree-seekers has climbed from 20% for the Fall 1985 cohort to 25% for the Fall 1989 cohort. (A cohort is a group of students who enter at the same time and are tracked over time as an

intact group). When degree-seekers are defined behaviorally as students who enroll for 12 or more credit hours (full-time) for at least two sessions, the completion rate climbs to 34% for the most recent four-year period.

While these encouraging trends were no doubt helped by the Title III Retention Project, it could certainly not be claimed that the project is entirely responsible for the improvement. However, it is possible to measure the effect of two elements of the Title III Retention Project on retention, both in the short run (return the following session) and the long run (enrollment after one, two, and three years). These two elements are the student success course and the mentor program, presented to the students as the MORE Program (Mentors and Orientation Reinforce Education).

Short-term Retention Effects

Early in the grant project, we measured the effect of mentoring and the extended orientation experience (either a one-credit hour college survival course or the three credit-hour student success course) on student performance in the term enrolled, as well as on the rate of return for the following session. We found that the most pronounced effect was produced by combining the orientation experience with mentoring, which produced a return rate the following session of over 90 percent, compared to the 65 percent return rate for all students. Similarly, we found that students who saw their mentors four to six times not only earned more credit hours, but a higher grade point average as well.

Findings from these early studies have been reported widely throughout the college, and will be replicated in the near future.

Now we are able to aggregate the numbers of students who have taken the student success course (about 65 percent of whom were assigned to faculty mentors) over several sessions and compare them with (a) college prep students not enrolling for SLS 1122 and (b) with all other students excluding those enrolling for college prep courses and for SLS 1122. These student groups are compared with respect to their rates of total courses passed and of registering for classes in the next session. As Table 1 shows, students enrolled in SLS 1122 passed their courses for that session at a rate of 81 percent, compared with rates of 56 percent for other college prep enrollers and 67.2 percent for all other students. The same table shows a return rate for the next session of 78 percent for SLS 1122 students compared to 67 percent for college prep enrollers and 57.6 percent for all other students.

Expressed as percentages, the differences in courses passed and in return rates are dramatic. The SLS 1122 enrollers passed their courses at rates 45 percent greater than other college prep enrollers and 21 percent greater than all other students. Similarly, SLS 1122 enrollers returned for classes the next session at rates 16.4 percent greater than other college prep enrollers and 35.4 percent greater than all other students.

Table 1 appears on the next page.

GROUP	N	PASS RATE SLS 1122	PASS RATE ALL CLASSES	RETURN RATE NEXT SESSION
SLS 1122 Enrollers	4,175	74%	81%	78%
College Prep Enrollers <u>Excluding SLS 1122</u> Enrollers	22,046	-	56%*	67%***
All Other Students <u>Excluding College Prep</u> <u>and SLS 1122 Enrollers</u>	147,164	-	67.2%**	57.6****

*Student Success enrollers demonstrate 45 percent greater pass rate than other college prep students.

**Student Success enrollers demonstrate 21 percent greater pass rate than all other students.

***Student Success enrollers demonstrate 16.4 percent greater return rate than other college prep students.

****Student Success enrollers demonstrate 35.4 percent greater return rate than all other students.

Table 1

Current Session Pass Rates and Session-to-Session Return Rate
for SLS 1122 Enrollers, College Prep Enrollers, and All Other
Students Enrolled 89901 Through 92931

Long-Term Retention Effects

We are also now able to determine the effect of the student success course (SLS 1122) on longer term enrollment. We have determined, through VALSTAR studies, that students who enrolled in SLS 1122 (about 65 percent of whom had mentors) are enrolled at a rate of 65 percent after four sessions, 48 percent after seven sessions, and at 30.4 percent after eleven sessions. These return rates compare with 50 percent, 33 percent, and 20 percent for a similar group of degree seekers over the same time periods. Similarly, students enrolled in Student Success showed greater number of hours attempted. SLS 1122 enrollers, by the beginning of their fourth sessions, had registered for an average of 30.5 credit hours; by the beginning of their seventh, 12 credit hours more; by their eleventh session, 8.1 hours more. Average credit hours enrolled for a similar group of degree seekers at those points were 25.5, 8.8, and 6.6. Over the three years' enrollment, SLS 1122 enrollers demonstrate the following percentages of increase over other degree seekers in return rate: 30 percent, 45 percent, and 52 percent. In average hours attempted, SLS enrollers lead other degree seekers by 39 percent, 36 percent, and 23 percent. In terms of FTE produced, SLS enrollers led other degree seekers by 55 percent, 100 percent, and 85 percent over the three years. Table 2, which presents this longitudinal data, appears on the next page.

GROUP	N	RETURN RATE	PERCENT INCREASE IN RETURN RATE	AVG. HRS. ATTEMPTED	PERCENT INCREASE IN AVG. HRS. ATT.	YEARLY FTE	PERCENT INCREASE IN YEARLY FTE
Student Success Enrollers Year 1	608	65%	30%	30.5	39%	301	55%
Other Degree Seekers Year 1	608	50%	-	25.5	-	194	-
Student Success Enrollers Year 2	608	48%	45%	12	36%	88	100%
Other Degree Seekers Year 2	608	33%	-	8.8	-	44	-
Student Success Enrollers Year 3	608	30.4%	52%	8.1	23%	37	85%
Other Degree Seekers Year 3	608	20%	-	6.6	-	20	-

Table 2

Projection of Effect of SLS 1122 on FTIC Enrollers in Session 1 1992
Over a Three-Year Period

Conclusions

The findings presented in this report point toward some rather clear conclusions. First, the combined effect of the student success course and the mentor program influences student performance in a way that is good for the college. Students enrolled in the course and assigned to a mentor clearly pass more of their courses in the current term and return for classes the next term at a substantially higher rate. In the long run, looking three years after initial enrollment, students taking the student success course and working with a mentor return at substantially higher rates, take substantially more credit hours, and generate dramatically more FTE than similar groups of students not participating in the program.

Second, the combined effect of the course and the mentoring is good for students. Greater completion rates indicate greater student success. By all accounts, the college should consider increasing the level of participation in the program. It is particularly interesting to look at the progress of college preparatory students. College-wide Indicators #16 and 17 show college prep students graduating at a rate of 25 percent, compared with other students graduating at a rate of 34 percent. Perhaps requiring college prep students to take SLS 1122 would help close the gap between the two groups. Taking the shorter view, college prep students not taking SLS 1122 pass 56 percent of their courses in their first session, while SLS 1122 students, most of whom are taking college prep classes, pass 81 percent of

their courses in the session in which they enrolled in Student Success.

Study of first-time-in-college students shows that 20 percent of these students register for courses and leave before completing any of their work. These students don't ever come back to give themselves or the college a second chance. Enrolling more of them in the student success course might decrease the percent of students who leave before completing the first semester hour.

If the college decides to increase participation in the student success course and the mentor program, staffing will have to be reconsidered. It is likely that incentives will need to be offered to recruit more participation as mentors; that department chairs will have to be willing to assign more faculty to teach student success as part of their full-time load; that the mentor program will have to be changed so that the mentor works with the student for only one semester, and that the student produces an educational plan by the end of the first semester of participation.

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