"Fostering Frameworks for Success: Building Student Support Networks Through Professional Development Badging"

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ABSTRACT

One challenge facing faculty and staff at higher education institutions, and particularly those with an access mission, is understanding and supporting their students in a holistic manner. Organizations with a high proportion of traditionally at-risk students must balance resource demands with providing the intensive teaching and advising models recommended for student success. This article explores the Student Success professional development badge as one efficient and effective model for building a holistic student support network on campuses.

As access to higher education has increased for historically underrepresented students, colleges and universities have experienced changes in the makeup of their student populations. Campuses have become more diverse across several factors. For example, between 1976 and 2014, the percentage of college students who identified as Hispanic rose from four to 17 percent, and those who identified as Black rose from 10 to 14 percent (NCES, 2016). According to a 2014 survey of first- and second-year public college students, approximately 41 percent of those enrolled in 2-year institutions and 29 percent of those at 4-year institutions reported taking at least one remedial course (Skomsvold, 2014). Additionally, in the 2011 – 2012 academic year, 11 percent of college students reported having a disability (NCES, 2016).

Institutions have implemented a variety of programs to support the academic success of these students, e.g., bridge programs, first-year seminars, learning communities, and peer mentoring. However, the demographic changes also require institutions to provide support to faculty and staff, as they must now facilitate learning and development for a more heterogeneous student body with varying needs, expectations, and learning styles. Research suggests that faculty professional development activities that focus on inclusive pedagogy have had positive effects on teaching and learning (Booker, et al., 2016; Anderson, et al., 2014). As interactions with staff through support services, extra-curricular activities, and even informal engagement affects student success (Tinto & Pusser, 2006), institutions also must provide relevant staff development to create a holistic approach to the intellectual, social, and cultural development of all students.

At Georgia Gwinnett College (GGC), over 30% of first-year students enroll in learning support courses; approximately 42% of them are first-generation; and many must negotiate complex life issues such as financial limitations, caregiving responsibilities, and food, housing, and transportation insecurities. These are students with ambition and promise, as well as many gifts and strengths, but who also tend to struggle with more external and academic preparation challenges than others. As research has shown, key hallmarks of student success, particularly for first-year matriculates, are growth mindset, self-efficacy, persistence, and progression, all of which tend to lead to graduation within a 4 to 6-year period (Cambridge-Williams, et al., 2013; Han, et al., 2017; Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015)

GGC's mission centers on the promotion of student success through a coordinated care model of support. Student support takes many forms, including intensive advising, extensive tutoring opportunities, and dynamic teaching methods. It is driven by a fused Academic and Student Affairs administrative structure

that focuses on helping students meet eight Integrated Educational Experience (IEE) outcomes and the six dimensions of wellness. But how are faculty and staff prepared for this time- and energy-intensive work? How can they learn the administrative processes, relationship-building skills, and best practices to serve these first-year students at one of their most vulnerable times?

The School of Transitional Studies at GGC, in response to this need, has explored alternative ways of providing faculty/staff professional development in order to offer an even more robust support network for its students. GGC's Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) sponsors various digital badges, corresponding to sets of professional development workshops in tracks. STS has begun offering a Student Success badge towards the goal of improving faculty and staff capabilities in educating and mentoring students. Participation in the Student Success badge cohort helps create a culture that supports the persistence, progression and graduation of all students, but particularly those beginning their college experience in Student Success (learning support) courses at GGC. The participant learning outcomes for this badge include:

- Understanding the particular academic, social, and personal needs of students enrolled in Student Success (learning support) courses

- Identifying resources available to support students' persistence, progression, and graduation

- Describing the features of Student Success course placement, pathways, and assessment

- Understanding and identifying best practices in learning support instruction and programming

- Understanding and identifying best practices in working with multilingual students

These learning outcomes address the particular needs and questions that have been raised by GGC faculty and staff who have extensive contact with our students and who wish to support them more effectively and compassionately.

Members of GGC's Council to Advise Transitional Studies (CATS) originated the proposal and structure of the Student Success Badge. In addition, faculty and staff serving on that committee have helped design and lead individual workshops. The CATS team included staff from the Mentoring and Advising Center and Academic Enhancement Center (which oversees tutoring), faculty representatives from the Math and English disciplines and Kaufman Library, and representatives from New Student Connections (orientation), Testing Services, Financial Aid, and Disability Services. This group aptly represented our faculty and staff support resources, as well as our commitment to looking at student success from multiple angles.

The final portfolio of workshops for the Student Success badge track at GGC was as follows:

- Understanding the Whole Student (student development theory, holistic approaches to support)

- Building Rapport and Relationships with Students (emotional intelligence and politeness theory)

- Placement and Pathways in Student Success (learning support course pathways and placement information)

- Best Practices in Working with Multilingual Students

- Best Practices in Learning Support and Beyond: Math Instruction

- Best Practices in Learning Support and Beyond: Reading and Writing Instruction

Participants in the series of workshops (first three usually offered fall semester, the others in spring semester) thus receive a balance of theoretical and practical knowledge of how best to work with and support their GGC students—particularly those in their first year or two. Workshops usually are a combination of lecture, discussion, and activities, maintaining an active learning environment. After each workshop session, which vary in length from 1-2 hours, participants have access to PowerPoint presentations, research bibliographies, and other resource materials via the workshop's Desire to Learn (D2L) course site. There is an embedded discussion board to encourage questions and ongoing conversation about the topics explored. To earn the microbadge for each workshop, participants must successfully pass a short quiz, also administrated through D2L. Once all six workshop microbadges are earned, participants apply for the overall Level 1 Student Success professional development badge. This badge is noted electronically on their profile page in GGC's online Academic Commons, but also can be added as a CV line and notated on their annual evaluations.

In 2018, the year the badge workshops were piloted, all six workshops were offered, at least two occasions of each. A total of 16 workshop sessions were run, with 78 faculty and staff members attending. In 2019, in observation of attendance trends, seven workshop sessions were offered, with a total of 28 faculty and staff attending. Session evaluations consistently indicated workshop and facilitator quality as above average to excellent, and participants found the experience to be a worthwhile use of their time. Some participants asked if the workshops could be moved fully online to promote greater convenience and access, which is an option to be explored with the CTE. Regardless of the type of workshop however, faculty and staff commented on the valuable strategies they obtained: how to put student development theories into use, verbal and physical communication best practices to encourage student belonging, and exercises to increase student engagement and meet students where they are. The workshops succeeded in providing both theoretical and applied knowledge that will promote student success in the classroom, mentoring sessions, and other engagement opportunities. Moving forward, additional topics and platforms for offering the Student Success badge workshops will be considered.

One of the benefits of the Student Success professional development badge as a model is that it can be replicated at relatively low resource cost. We used a team of faculty and staff members to both design and create the workshops for the badge. The CTE provided physical and online space (through Desire to Learn LMS) for the workshops and administrative support to organize the advertising and registration for each session. While not all schools may have a Center for Teaching Excellence, workshops could be offered through other campus units, such as:

- Faculty institutes or faculty/staff orientation
- Disciplinary departments
- Student Success or TRIO offices
- Advising or academic coaching staff/offices
- Human Resources

Because the Student Success badge is structured as a set of workshops that could be singled out and reappropriated for different events and audiences, it also possesses great versatility. For example, at GGC we have offered the "Understanding the Whole Student" workshop as part of the New Faculty Academy onboarding program. Versatility is further achieved via the customization of such workshops. At GGC, we have a large population of at-risk students, many of whom are in student success/learning support courses; therefore, we tailored our badge to help faculty and staff learn more about those courses, policies, and pedagogies. However, other institutions might focus their workshops on particular campus issues or target populations.

When implementing such a program, we recommend including both faculty and staff as leaders and workshop attendees. Doing so ensures the construction of a robust student support network across campus; faculty and staff work together to build relationships with students, meeting them where they are. Both anecdotally and via research, we know that it isn't always a faculty member who ends up mentoring a student, particular those in underrepresented and first-generation groups. Fostering an inclusive partnership model of professional development recognizes staff members' roles in developing students and builds bridges between faculty and staff across campus.

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Ice Breakers Promote Mindfulness

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Ice breakers are more than what most instructors may think and have become a critical segment of my first-day agenda. Many may view them as a waste of time or "fluff," but I consider then to be time well spent. They provide students with a way to establish trust and an open environment; they help alleviate first-day stress. Ice breakers allow students to get to know each other and to see the "human" side of learning. They not only engage students in active learning, but they promote mindfulness. Mindfulness is being aware of the present moment without judgment which most ice breakers invite. They invite intense focus. In order to participate, students have to listen to what is being said. The following is one of my favorite ice breakers. In addition to intent listening, students are required to create their own details.

Toilet Paper Activity

It starts with bringing in a roll of toilet paper with perforations that present as squares of toilet paper, not a roll that is straight paper without perforations. Begin by handing the roll to the closest student, directing him or her to "take as much as you want." Most students will ask what they need it for. Try to deflect that question. Tell students to "just take some, as much as you need." Wait until each student has taken some toilet paper.

Have the first student count out how many squares he or she has. For each square, the student should share something about him or herself. The next student does the same but cannot share anything the first student said. For example, if the first student said his favorite color is blue, then the second person cannot offer his or her favorite color. He or she has to offer a different detail. By the time you get to the last student, the details get very creative.

This activity encourages each student to listen carefully to the other students so as not to repeat details. It's fun to watch student catch others who accidentally share the same thing. This activity is fun and helps students share personal details with one another, which helps the whole class get to know one another better. It becomes an even more exciting activity when the instructor goes last.