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SUCCESS@Seneca:

Facilitating Student and Staff Success

by Steve Fishman and Lisa Decandia

The research findings are unequivocal. Student learning and student retention are correlated strongly with student engagement. The more actively engaged students are - with college faculty and staff, with other students, with the subject matter being learned - the more likely they are to persist in their college studies and to achieve at higher levels. The correlation has been emphasized in a number of major studies and reports on the college experience.

In his research, Alexander Astin (1977, 1993) determined that the persistence or retention rate of students is greatly affected by the level and quality of their interactions with peers as well as faculty and staff. Tinto (1987) indicates that the factors in students dropping or "stopping" out include academic difficulty, adjustment problems, lack of clear academic and career goals, uncertainty, lack of commitment, poor integration with the college community, incongruence and isolation. Consequently, retention can be highly affected by enhancing student interaction with campus personnel. Rendon (1995) indicates in her study that two critical factors in students' decisions to remain enrolled until the attainment of their goals are their successfully making the transition to college aided by initial and extended orientation and advisement programs and making positive connections with college personnel during their first term of enrollment. Noel (1985) stated: "It is the people who come face-to-face with students on a regular basis who provide the positive growth experiences for students that enable them to identify their goals and talents and learn how to put them to use. The caring attitude of college personnel is viewed as the most potent retention force on a campus."

As students become more integrated into the academic and social fabric of the campus community, their levels of commitment, academic self-confidence and motivation increase. This in turn influences their levels of persistence and, consequently, opportunities for academic success.

Similarly, research findings indicate that job satisfaction strongly correlates with employee engagement in the workplace. The more actively engaged college staff are - with students, co-workers and supervisors - the more likely they are to attain a sense of responsibility, recognition, achievement, contribution and value which in turn, leads to an increase in job satisfaction.

Mumford (1976) argues that workers have "knowledge needs"

(work that utilizes knowledge and skills), "psychological needs", (such as recognition, responsibility, status and advancement), "task needs" (which include the need for meaningful work and some degree of autonomy, and "moral needs" (to be treated in the way that employers would themselves wish to be treated). Herzberg (1959) presented a theory, which looks at 'motivators' and proposed that enduring states of motivation in employees lead to an increase of job satisfaction. Motivators include: responsibility, recognition, promotion, achievement and intrinsic aspects of the job. Intrinsic motivation involves the employee attributing job behaviours to outcomes which are derived from the job itself. An employee who is experiencing a state of intrinsic motivation tends to be committed to the job and self-fulfilled through it (Klubnik and Roschelle, 1996).

As college employees become more integrated into the fabric of the campus community, their levels of commitment, motivation and satisfaction increase.

The SUCCESS@Seneca program facilitates both student and staff success.

All students begin college with the goals of academic, career and personal success. Some students manage to navigate their educational journey very successfully. Many, however, do not. Some experience difficulties with the transition to college. Others lack motivation, self-discipline, academic skills and career direction. Perceived, insurmountable barriers including personal issues, disabilities, or financial problems lead to unsuccessful completion of their academic school year.

In addition to the traditional applicant many institutions are reaching out to new and diverse students. During the past decade, North American colleges and universities have made a concerted effort to create environments that reflect the diversity of the general population. The demand for a diverse and representative student body is based in part on beliefs regarding social justice (equal opportunity) and in part on a philosophy of education (educational value of a diverse student body). As the effort to attract and retain students of under-represented minorities has intensified, colleges and universities are implementing a variety of support programs. Unfortunately, the success of programs to enroll underrepresented student groups has in some cases been associated with a relatively high dropout rate for the newly recruited students. Colleges and universities are understandably interested in minimizing such dropouts and maintaining student diversity.

Colleges and Universities continue to grapple with high attrition rates. They have developed excellent resources including counseling and disability services, academic advisors, student services, learning centres, financial aid departments, and so on. Yet, the number of students who are unsuccessful, withdraw from college or just quietly fade away remain alarmingly high. An

innovative and effective multi-dimensional approach that addresses student success and retention related activities may be the elusive piece of the success puzzle.

SUCCESS@Seneca has teamed up with the General Arts and Science programs at Seneca's Newnham campus. The design of an integrated service delivery model addresses numerous student success and retention related activities by providing the essential connection between academics and college resources. The program focuses on the promotion and support of academic services, career development, personal needs, and the transition into college and beyond, working cooperatively to address the needs of the "whole" student.

This multi-faceted approach includes several components: An extensive transition and orientation program is offered prior to the first semester and prepares students to meet the challenges of college life. Through social activities, students attain a sense of belonging and connectedness to the college program and community. A series of success and learning skills workshops provides students with specific strategies for academic and personal success. Mock lectures allow the students to experience the classroom environment and obtain valuable classroom strategies from a Learning Strategist. Overall feedback from students who participated in the transition and orientation component was very positive. Student feedback included: a sense of belongingness and connection; academic preparedness; motivation; increased self confidence; and an understanding of the college expectations and resources.

A user-friendly on-line portal, allows students to build on their academic 'toolbox' (strategies and study skills), explore career options and enhance their communication and relationship skills. SUCCESS@Seneca staff utilize this on-line portal to communicate with students on a regular basis. Students are reminded of upcoming critical dates, workshops, and social events. The portal is updated and revised on an ongoing basis. Student feedback positively reflects convenience, useful information and helpful resources at their fingertips.

An 'Early Warning System' allows the SUCCESS@Seneca team to identify and assist 'at-risk' students on a timely basis, offering interventions and resources that lead to student success.

Ongoing 'Success @' workshops and seminars, social activities and electronic communications (E-mail) promotes a sense of connection and support.

At the heart of the program is the College Coach component. A College Coach is a college employee who chooses to participate in the SUCCESS@Seneca program. The coach takes an active interest in the student's college progress, has a willingness to assist students

in exploring services that can improve their skills, and motivates them to successfully complete their college journey. The aim of the College Coach is to keep the students connected, on track, goal oriented and motivated. The coach can help students establish goals, anticipate and troubleshoot problems, encourage them to explore and connect with the appropriate college resources and people, and promote self sufficiency. The main responsibility of a College Coach is to stay connected with the student(s). The SUCCESS@Seneca staff provide training, ongoing support and on-line resources. The coach meets with a student every two weeks for up to twenty minutes and completes a brief tracking form following each session. Therefore, coaching one student would involve a maximum of forty minutes per month. The College Coach is not compensated however, they are recognized at a year end event.

Through surveys, questionnaires, transcripts and feedback sessions, each aspect and component of SUCCESS@seneca is tracked. Findings indicate that those students who participated in SUCCESS@seneca were overall, more successful and had higher grade point averages than those students who did not participate.

Surveyed students indicate a positive shift toward a pro-active and responsible learner approach - an increase in motivation, self-discipline, problem-solving abilities, perseverance and positive attitude toward their studies. Student feedback reflected a smooth transition to college life, a strong sense of belonging and connection, an increase in self-confidence, a feeling of academic preparedness, and a positive and realistic sense of self.

Feedback obtained from the College Coaches has also been very positive and encouraging. Employees who participate in this aspect of the program feel a sense of value and connectedness. They believe that they are making a positive difference in the lives of students and are eager to encourage them toward success. Employees also feel more a part of the college community and feel a sense of pride. They have a better understanding and appreciation of the college student and the academic journey that lies before them. They are more aware of the issues and barriers that prevent student success as well as the college resources that provide assistance and support. Employees report that their work is more meaningful when they are directly involved with student success. Coaching college students instills a sense of responsibility, achievement, contribution and value.

The literature overwhelmingly points to benefits to the college, the coach, and the student. Coaching is useful and powerful in understanding and advancing organizational culture, providing access to informal and formal networks of communication, and offering professional stimulation to college employees (Luna and Cullen, 1995).

Coaching supports professional growth and renewal, which in

turn empowers college employees as individuals and colleagues (Boice, 1992). Not only do students become empowered through the assistance of a coach, but coaches themselves also feel renewed through the sharing of power and the advocacy of collegiality (Luna and Cullen, 1995).

The SUCCESS@Seneca program addresses numerous success and retention related activities with the college community through a pro-active and collaborative approach. Post secondary institutions have a responsibility to its students and employees - a responsibility to provide an environment which embraces those initiatives that foster a sense of achievement, contribution, value and success.

SUCCESS@ Seneca is premised on the theory that students and staff function best in an atmosphere of mutual respect, acceptance and consideration. It is also based on the knowledge that students and staff need many opportunities to develop those skills that lead to a pro-active and responsible approach to life tasks. SUCCESS@Seneca empowers individuals to take charge of their destiny in an encouraging, supportive, learning environment. Through regular and consistent connections between student and staff, SUCCESS@Seneca facilitates positive change, growth and success.

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