

Students

<http://chronicle.com/free/v54/i29/29a02501.htm>

From the issue dated March 28, 2008

At Community Colleges, a Call to Meet New Students at the Front Door

By LIBBY SANDER

Community-college students, like students anywhere, begin to form their impressions of an institution the instant they set foot on its campus. And often what they find during those first few weeks can determine whether they come back for more — or turn heel and leave.

The findings from a new study, the Survey of Entering Student Engagement, may offer some clues as to why those who leave do so, and what officials can do to make them stay.

The survey results, which were released this week, show that a large number of students are unaware of their college's core services in the opening weeks of their first semester. And only one in five said they felt welcome at their institutions the first time they came to campus.

Community colleges, the survey concludes, would be wise to reach out to their new students earlier and more aggressively in such areas as orientation, academic advising, and financial aid. The payback? Happier and more productive students and, hopefully, higher retention rates.

"The more investment you make in a student coming in, the more likely the student is going to be successful," says Regina S. Peruggi, president of Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York, where officials have created learning communities of 25 or so first-year students to usher them through their first semester.

But, she adds, "You can't drop it afterward. If you invest in the first year, you have to continue that onward. You don't get a new student overnight."

The new survey, known as Sense, included 22 institutions and yielded more than 13,200 responses. It was administered during the fourth and fifth weeks of the fall academic term in courses that were most likely to include entering students. (The survey was in the pilot phase this year, and a greater number of institutions will participate in the second Sense survey this fall.)

The Findings

Community colleges typically lose about half of their students prior to the students' second year, the survey noted. What officials wanted to know was why.

"A lot of people had a well-informed hunch for a long time that community colleges lose a lot of

students very early on in their college careers," says Kay McClenney, director of the Sense survey as well as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement. "The first term of college is enormously important."

Among the key findings:

Only a third of respondents said that in the first few weeks of the term, an adviser helped them set academic goals and devise a plan to achieve them.

Forty-one percent said they never used academic-planning services in the first few weeks.

Less than a third said a financial-aid staff member helped them analyze their needs for financial aid.

Thirty-eight percent said they attended an on-campus orientation before classes began, while 20 percent said they were not aware of an orientation program or course.

The gaps are worrisome, Ms. McClenney says.

"Community colleges serve a much higher population of students who are first-generation students. They are students who do not have personally, or in their family, the experience of going to college, how you find the resources, how you navigate the whole process," she says. "They are more vulnerable."

They may be more vulnerable, but the survey also revealed that they are highly motivated.

Sixty-eight percent of the respondents said they strongly agreed with the statement, "I have the motivation to do what it takes to succeed in college," and in focus groups accompanying the survey, students said they were committed to finishing their education. Dropping out, they said, would come only because of too many demands on time and money.

Strength in Numbers

In many cases, the key to making new students feel comfortable and welcome means placing them in small groups with their peers.

At Kingsborough, Ms. Peruggi says officials have been increasing the number of learning communities for first-year students for the last five or six years.

Each community links three courses — in English, another content-based subject, and a student-development course — and meets three times a week.

In addition to connecting academics and advising, Ms. Peruggi says, the communities provide students with a group of classmates and three professionals to serve as friendly faces on campus. A recent study by national researchers found that Kingsborough's learning communities did result in greater academic success for students.

The approach, however, is not cheap. Faculty development and counseling, in particular, make it an expensive model.

"But if you look in the long run, and you're retaining students, it's a very wise investment," she says. "If you can ensure student success, isn't that worth it?"

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: Students

Volume 54, Issue 29, Page A25

[Copyright](#) © 2008 by [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)

[Subscribe](#) | [About The Chronicle](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Terms of use](#) | [Privacy policy](#) | [Help](#)