Student success courses catch on, slowly, at community colleges

Submitted by Paul Fain on February 21, 2012 - 3:00am

Community colleges can improve graduation rates by offering a course that teaches students how to navigate college with lessons on study skills, time management and how to find the bursar’s office. Yet while “student success” courses are increasingly common, resistance remains strong at many community colleges.

That’s because all courses come with costs, through hiring or shifting faculty, finding classrooms and creating curriculums. And some academics don’t like the idea of spending limited resources or awarding credit on classes that teach note-taking or other basic skills.

Another challenge is turf wars over deciding which department should manage a student success course. If the class is housed in the communications department, for example, that probably means communications can include one less traditional course among its offerings.

It can also be controversial to ask students to pay for a success class, which are sometimes seen as a patronizing extension of high school, but are typically 1-3 credits, and count toward degrees or credentials as would an English or math class.

Yet research strongly suggests that taking the plunge on a student success course is a good move for two-year colleges.

Take Tulsa Community College, which for four years has required that about 1,000 incoming students take its “Academic Strategies” course. Those students are 20 percent more likely to remain enrolled at the college than students who don’t take the course, according to data collected by the college, and they also perform better in academic coursework.

Other community colleges have seen similar results. At Durham Technical Community College, for example, students who take the course have shown a 30 percent increase in retention.

Rachel Singer is a fan of student success courses. She’s vice president for community college relations and applied research at Achieving the Dream, which supports such offerings.

“Once you’ve seen what the results are, it’s kind of a no-brainer,” said Singer, who helped develop a student success course at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York,
where she worked previously. That course improved student retention and graduation rates. And Singer said a survey showed it eventually won over the faculty, who believed the course was an "irreplaceable" form of student support.

**Rare Requirement**

Many community colleges require that students with remedial needs take success courses. Some experts, however, say two-year colleges should go further, and make all first-time students take them.

"Research indicates that students who complete these courses are more likely to complete other courses, earn better grades, have higher overall GPAs and obtain degrees," according to a new report [4] from the Center for Community College Student Engagement.

The sector is generally wary of mandatory requirements, in part because of an unwillingness to impose burdens on students who are more likely to be adults or work long hours at jobs than their peers at four-year institutions. As a result, the report from the center found that only 15 percent of community colleges require student success courses for all first-time students.

"We need to relinquish the reluctance to require," said Kay McClennen, the center's director.

For-profit institutions may be more likely to make the courses a requirement. All students at Harrison College, for example, take a class called "Strategies for Success." And faculty and staff at Harrison must take a two-day training session designed to complement that course and to help college employees work better with students, said a college spokesman.

Houston Community College is among the largest mandatory adopters among community colleges. All entering students who haven't previously completed 12 college credits -- about 12,000 students each fall -- take one of five different student success courses [5] during their first semester.

Three of the courses have a specific career focus – like engineering or health care – but all of them "are designed to orient students to the behaviors, expectations and rewards of college as well as support services," according to the college's website [5]. Students must pick a major and file a degree plan after finishing the classes.

Of course, success courses vary in quality. McClennen's group is studying what class content works best.

At Tulsa Community College, faculty members designed the course with help from student focus groups. And they've tweaked approaches used in the class, which is housed in the English department, since it was first introduced.

The college had an advantage in scaling up the program. First-time students from local high schools can qualify for a program [6] that waives tuition. The college requires that those students take the success course, and they're inclined to do so since they're getting a full ride. Other students at Tulsa can take the course, however.

The college has conducted research on the course's effect, and found that students who took it were significantly more likely to earn a C or better in 13 of 15 other academic courses.

**Who Benefits?**

Student success courses got a nod from a task force in California [7], which has called for a "reboot" of student success policies at the state's 112 community colleges. But the panel stopped short of recommending that student success courses be required broadly.
Among the recommendations endorsed last month by the system’s board is a requirement that new students “whose diagnostic assessments show a lack of readiness for college to participate in a support resource, such as a student success course, learning community or other support activity.”

The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges backed that call. In a resolution, the faculty group said the courses should be offered to “all students who can benefit” from them.

But that implies that not all students can benefit from the courses. And when money is as tight as it is in California, faculty leaders don’t want to waste any resources.

“The well-prepared student might not need such a course and mandating it might merely prevent him or her from reaching his or her goals,” Michelle L. Pilati, the Academic Senate’s president and a professor of psychology at Rio Hondo College, said in an e-mail. She said some first-time students “could already have college experience or might only be needing one class for career advancement or to apply to some other program.”

Which students will be helped by taking the course remains an open question, and one that experts say may only be answered by experimentation. But they say it’s a safe bet that right now, too few students are being steered toward success courses.