

Peer Group Reports on Selected Accountability System Success Measures

The Higher Education Accountability System is designed to record institutional achievements in the *Closing the Gaps* target areas and to promote institutional improvements in those areas. The process utilizes peer groups to address topics and issues of importance to the institutions. During the recent round of meetings, each peer group was asked to examine its members' success data. Each peer group was also requested to select several critical accountability success measures for further examination. The groups were asked to share best practices and lessons learned. Each peer group collaborated to prepare a report on the success measures selected and the practices identified as making significant contributions toward their improvement.

The groups worked independently to decide what information to include in their reports, how to format their reports, and the level of detail to be presented. The groups prepared reports summarizing the data and shared best practices for improving results. This summary, which highlights the Success Best Practices identified in the reports, shows the variety and kinds of actions taken by higher education institutions across Texas to improve student success.

The five two-year institution peer groups collectively selected ten success measures to examine. Out of those, the measures picked by most of the groups included:

- Six-year graduation and persistence rate
- Total degrees and certificates awarded
- Developmental education students' completion of their first college-level course in a subject area in which they did not meet the state standard
- One- and two-year persistence rate of first-time students, and
- Percent of students employed or enrolled at a university one year after graduation.

The four university peer groups showed more variation in their selection of success measures. The measures chosen by most of the groups were:

- Graduation rate of various years' length (four-, five-, six- and ten-years were mentioned)
- Number of graduates by level and ethnicity, and
- Six-year graduation and persistence rate.

The full reports from the peer groups are posted on the Coordinating Board's website at: <http://www.txhighereddata.org/Interactive/Accountability/PeerGroup.cfm> . These reports contain more complete discussions of best practices than the summary below. The peer group reports also analyze data for their selected success measures.

The best practices gleaned from the peer group reports are categorized into broad topics below. Practices identified by two-year and four-year institutions are combined.

P-16 and College Readiness

P-16 initiatives are designed to improve high school and higher education linkages and student preparation. Many of the P-16 efforts are managed through the auspices of P-16 local and

regional councils and concern college readiness activities that seek to ensure that students graduate with the skills needed to succeed in college. Readiness programs are also found in colleges where underprepared students receive aid in math, reading, and writing so that they can register for college-level courses.

- High school and college collaborate on remediation programs that seek to guarantee that students graduate from high school college ready.
- For students without college-level skills, colleges and universities offer intensive summer programs to bring up their skill levels.
- Colleges encourage dual credit and concurrent enrollment
- If students are not college ready, institutions make developmental education courses more interesting to students by integrating the content into technical fields to place emphasis on real-world applications or into academic content.
- Some institutions do not want students to forget their developmental education instruction before taking the related college-level course. They are requiring students to take college math in the first semester after completing developmental education math.
- Mandatory lab time for students in math developmental education.
- Institutions send representatives out into communities to inspire students to think about college, and two-year and four-year institutions create articulation plans to inspire students to earn a four-year degree.

Example: TSTC Harlingen offers a “Quick Review” program for students. The program is a one-week intensive review course in developmental reading, writing, or math that is taught immediately prior to the onset of the semester. Over 70% of the students completing a “Quick Review” course jump at least one developmental level and many complete their TSI plan in the area they studied.

Advising and Other Student Support Services, especially for At-Risk Students

Tight institutional budgets have frequently reduced advising. Many institutions have recognized that contact with individual students has been lost and that students need the information and encouragement that advisers offer. Advising is especially helpful to at-risk students who have a higher than normal probability of making bad choices that will profoundly affect their future. These students often need even more attention and assistance.

- Advising can take many different formats, including intrusive advising programs that seek out students. Some institutions may insist on mandatory advising, while others couple advising with career services and/or academic advisors for advisement on picking a major. Advisers may be faculty members or staff members. Academic advisors may also serve as transfer advisors.;
- Institutions may also use peer mentors and tutors to supplement advisors. Peer tutors work to help students succeed in core courses and upper division courses, and writing, math, and science classes.
- Technology can be used to improve the ease and speed of routine advising tasks, such as review of transcripts so students may be awarded appropriate degree without having to submit an application; or on-line degree audits so that students know what courses apply to their degrees and can check their progress.
- Financial aid is an equally important topic on which students need advice.
- Early identification of at-risk students at the time of admission or through risk analysis programs can target students who may need extra attention.

Example: The University of Texas-Pan American's computerized Early Warning System allows faculty to identify students at mid- semester who are having difficulty in the courses they are teaching. Student Development Specialists working under the University Retention Advisement Program alert students via letter, email and/or telephone calls that they are at risk of failing the course and encourage them to meet with the professor and/or seek assistance.

Curriculum Enhancements and Flexibility

Curriculum enhancements are designed to improve the teaching of courses and the learning of students. Improvements to curriculum aid student success.

- Curriculum reforms keep courses and programs relevant and alternative course configuration can reduce the length of programs by reconfiguring courses.
- Redesign of courses can improve student engagement and convey the material more successfully. Learning labs benefit both academically borderline and more successful students.
- Use of outcomes-based assessment tracks whether students are learning the content of courses and can document whether students have acquired critical thinking skills.
- Block format classes improve retention by reducing the number and duration of courses taken at one time..Residential and curriculum-based learning communities provide students support for college-level expectations.
- More flexible course delivery, such as on-line courses, and off-campus delivery sites, can increase access to classes.
- Articulation plans between community colleges and universities make the transition from course to course and from institution to institution more seamless and successful.
- Reverse transfer of courses from universities to colleges permits awarding of associate degrees to students who have completed degree requirements at another institution.

First-year transition

Helping students persist through the first semester, then from the first to the second semester, and so on are the first steps to student success and graduation. Students are most likely to drop out of college in the first semesters, prompting institutions to focus attention of improving student transitions in the first semesters.

- Orientation sessions set the tone for colleges' and universities' interaction with their students. Optional orientation may be offered during the summer, but increasingly institutions hold mandatory programs for all new students to acquaint them with information they need for their first semester. Sometimes these programs occur intensively in the first two weeks of a semester, or they may be accompanied by a math review prior to readiness testing and placement.
- First-year seminar or first-year experience courses are of longer duration than orientations and may focus on common degree requirements such as core curriculum courses or on techniques, behaviors, and attitudes for academic success (learning how to learn). Freshman seminars are sometimes combined with learning communities.
- First-year orientation or courses may include academic survival skills, including time management, reading skills, note taking, stress management, critical thinking, and self-assessment.

Example: Clarendon College keeps their on-campus residential students engaged and busy during the first two-weeks on campus. This program has helped improve persistence. The Small Community College Peer Group agreed that the first two weeks in higher education are a critical time as students adjust to new challenges.

Career transition

Services that help students make a successful transition to a career can be exactly the type of supports some students need to help them persist to graduation in anticipation of appropriate employment.

- Two-year institutions often work with employers to establish hiring needs so that students prepared in their technical programs have the skills expected by employers.
- Career services help students focus their course enrollments on their career goals.
- Some institutions have changed course requirements to award more certificates and marketable skills awards. These periodic milestones commemorate students' progress toward degrees or certificates and encourage persistence.

Example: Panola College has changed the course requirements in welding and petroleum to award more certificates and marketable skills awards, which encourages persistence and success. They explained that petroleum companies are paying their students during internships and then hiring them upon graduation.

Summary: Institutions are taking a holistic approach to strengthen student engagement and consequently have positively impacted student persistence and graduation. Institutions are utilizing comprehensive, overlapping and interactive strategies that address students' instructional, financial, and social needs.