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ABSTRACT

Community colleges have many concerns over attrition and retention rates. Studies show that 50% of freshmen drop out before completion of a degree or certificate, and nearly half of all attending students are 25 years or older yet lack basic math, reading, and writing skills. Students experiencing learning difficulties, and older students such as single moms have an especially hard time making a transition into higher education, but they are still a growing population in the educational arena. Mercy College (Ohio) has experienced many of the same statistics within its institution and decided to implement the PASS (Project Assuring Student Success) program to address the declining retention rates. Objectives of PASS are to provide academic and other support services for students, develop a comprehensive retention model that addresses the needs of a diverse student population, and disseminate results of the program to other institutions who might benefit from its implications. All entering students must attend an orientation meeting and enroll in a student success strategies course. Mentoring, mid-term progress reports, and academic advising are some of the many aspects of the PASS program. After implementation of this program, retention rates at Mercy College rose from 82% to 89.7%. Retention rates are expected to continue to rise. (CJW)

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**P.A.S.S. Program
(Project Assuring Student Success)
Mercy College of Northwest Ohio
An Unpublished Paper**

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Statement of Need

Institutions of higher education have been concerned about retention and attrition rates over the years. Recent statistics show that approximately fifty percent (50%) of the freshmen enrolled in colleges and universities drop out before completing their degree program. (Brawer, 1996). Rising attrition rates at colleges across the country can be attributed to growing populations of under prepared students many being either non-traditional age, single parents, or learning disabled.

Recent studies have indicated that the number of adult students in higher education has been increasing to the point where nearly half of all current students are twenty-five (25) years or older and tend to lack basic mathematics, reading, and writing skills. (Culross, 1996). One study estimates that the population of students, age forty (40) and over, has increased 235% between 1970 and 1993. (Education Resources Institute and Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1996).

Older, non-traditional women, many of whom are single parents, have an especially difficult time making the transition to higher education. (Thompson, 1995-1996). Single moms have a difficult time juggling all the demands of their dual role and tend to do more poorly than traditional students in their academic work. (Blakely, S., 1996) and (Jing, J. & Mayer, L., 1995). The first-year attrition rates for non-traditional students tend to be much higher than that of traditional age students, in some cases being twice as high. (Horn, L.J. & Carroll, C.D., 1996). Older students, especially single parents, require a comprehensive set of support services involving both on-campus and off-campus resources for their academic success and retention. (Huff, D.D. & Thorpe, B., 1997).

Students with learning disabilities, including those suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder, attending institutions of higher education have also increased dramatically in recent years. (Malakpa, Sakui W.G., 1997) and (Jones, G.C., Kalivoda, K.S., & Higbee, J.L., 1997). Students with learning disabilities continue to experience difficulties in higher education because of the lack of support services being provided by the institution. Without these services, students with learning disabilities are less likely to be successful in their academic pursuits.

The number of traditional age students entering college today under-prepared and with the lack of basic skills necessary for college-level work is a problem as well. The overall preparation level of students declined from the mid 1960's to the early 1980's are demonstrated by data from SAT and ACT. There has been some improvement lately, but there is still relatively low performance, both in absolute terms and international comparisons. (Hansen, E. J., 1998).

Mercy College of Northwest Ohio has experienced similar increases in the student population. The college has seen an increase in the number of under-prepared traditional age students, non-traditional age students, single parents, and learning disabled. In addition, the college has seen an alarming decline in the retention rate of students.

The number of traditional age students showing deficiencies in mathematics, reading, and writing placement skills testing has increased two-fold in recent years. The current average age of students at this institution is approximately twenty-three (23) to twenty-four (24) years of age. The number of single parent students continues to rise with the latest figure being thirty-six percent (36%) of the total student body. Students with diagnosed learning disabilities now comprise seven percent (7%) of the total student body compared to two percent (2%) four (4) years ago.

The retention rate for the college (founded in 1993) was in the ninety percent (90%) range until the past several years. In 1999, the annual retention rate of students dropped to an all time low of eighty-two percent (82%).

A review of the literature, as well as a study conducted by Mercy College in fall of 1997, suggests that few small, private institutions of higher education have a multi-faceted or comprehensive program to meet the unique challenges of these under-prepared and at-risk student populations. Small, private institutions have either non-existent programs to retain these students, or programs too narrow in scope. The effort of Mercy College in the past has been single-focused, many times only meeting a portion of their needs.

Significance of the Project

In order to address the declining retention rates at the college, a multi-faceted, comprehensive, and collaborative program was designed to help students be successful in their academic endeavors. This program was developed to counteract the rising attrition rates and also meet the needs of the growing diversity in the student population. This program is called PASS (Project Assuring Student Success). PASS is believed to be a comprehensive retention model that can be replicated at other small institutions of higher education. The objectives of PASS are:

1. To provide academic and other support services for students that will result in a ninety percent (90%), or better, retention of students at the college;
2. To develop a comprehensive retention model that addresses the needs of a diverse student population that can easily be replicated at other institutions of higher education; and
3. To disseminate the results of this program to other institutions of higher education through literature, conference presentations, and journal articles.

Project Design

The components of this comprehensive retention program at Mercy College of Northwest Ohio are the following:

- ***College Student Inventory.*** All entering students are required to take the Noel-Levitz's *College Student Inventory*. The results of this diagnostic assessment are given to the student's college mentor. These results are discussed with the students the first two (2) weeks of the term.
- **Orientation.** All entering students are required to attend a full day orientation session, which is tailored, to each specific academic program, and the specific needs of the student.
- **Student Success Strategies Course.** All first time college students are required to take this course. This two (2) hour credit course is designed to help students enhance academic performance and achieve efficient learning.

- **Student Success Center.** This center was established to provide those services necessary for students to be successful in their college endeavors. Some of the services provided are: group tutoring, time management workshops, study-skills workshops, assistance with learning disabilities, stress management, counseling referrals to local mental health agencies, and a variety of other services.
- **REACH Program.** The REACH (Remedial Education Addressing Collegiate Hurdles) program was established to assist under-prepared students in developing skills and abilities necessary for success at the college level. Students with academic deficiencies, based on placement tests, take developmental courses in mathematics, reading, and writing. They also take courses in keyboarding and student success strategies. REACH students are assigned special faculty mentors to assist with their academic progress.
- **Mentoring.** All students are assigned either a faculty or professional staff member as a mentor. Students are required to meet at least three (3) times a term with their mentor.
- **Early Alert System.** An early alert system was developed. Students who are struggling in the classroom are referred to the Student Success Center for assistance.
- **Mid Term Progress Reports.** Students who are struggling academically at mid term are issued a mid-term report. They are then required to get assistance from the Student Success Center.
- **Academic Advising.** The system of advising at the college was redesigned. Training of academic advisors has been enhanced. Only a select number of faculty members serve as academic advisors to ensure they are giving students the best assistance academically.
- **Faculty/Staff Development.** A number of workshops have been conducted to assist the faculty in being more student-centered.
- **Student Handbook/Day Planner.** The student handbook also doubles as a day planner for students. Workshops are presented to students on how to better organize their day.

- **Retention Committee.** A retention committee was established consisting of representatives from the various college constituencies. This committee monitors and assesses retention efforts at the college.

Project Evaluation

In order to ensure the success of this program, constant, on-going evaluation will take place. A longitudinal study will be conducted to determine the success of this program. Attrition/retention rates will be tracked as part of this study. The amount of funds expended per student utilizing these services will be monitored to determine the cost effectiveness. Finally, a satisfaction survey will be administered to students seeking their perceived value of this program.

Conclusion

In order to enhance PASS, the retention committee is looking to establish a full tutoring program, including peer tutoring. This full tutoring program would consist of a combination of peer tutoring and supplemental instruction.

The efforts, to date, of this comprehensive retention model at Mercy College of Northwest Ohio have been successful. Prior to implementing this program the college retention rate had dropped to an all time low of eighty-two percent (82%). The retention rate through the PASS program improved to eighty-nine point seven percent (89.7%). College officials believe the retention rate will continue to improve with the development of the comprehensive tutoring system.

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Mercy College of Northwest Ohio

Mercy College of Northwest Ohio (MCNO), sponsored by the Religious Sisters of Mercy and Sisters of Charity of Montreal, is a two-year private, Catholic institution of higher education serving men and women from surrounding counties of the greater Toledo area. Built on a rich heritage of excellence in nursing education as Mercy School of Nursing (1917-1994), Mercy College of Northwest Ohio was incorporated in December of 1992 and began the only two-year Catholic College in the state of Ohio in January, 1993. The college is accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. MCNO prides itself in providing excellence in nursing and allied health education at the associate degree level in a values-based Christian Environment. The college currently offers associate degrees in nursing, pharmacy technology, health information technology, medical laboratory technology, and radiologic technology. The college began offering a baccalaureate of science degree in nursing fall, 2000.

The college promotes the integration of technical and general studies as a basis for successful career preparation. Correlation of theoretical and experiential learning is emphasized. Within the academic setting, faculty members view excellence in the teaching/learning process as their primary responsibility.

Rooted in basic Christian beliefs and values of excellence, human dignity, justice, mercy, sacredness of life, and service, the college community is committed to living these values and to finding ways to embody them in the educational process. The college supports a strong working relationship among students, faculty, and administration to maintain a Christian environment that fosters the development of the individual.

Mercy College of Northwest Ohio is a member of the Mercy Health System and one of twenty-one (21) Mercy Colleges in the Mercy Higher Education Colloquium. The college holds memberships in many professional associations including the American Association of Community Colleges, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and the Association of Colleges and Universities. The college has also been designated an eligible institution in the Department of Education's Strengthening Institutions Program.

Student demographics

The college functions as an urban commuter campus with on-campus housing available. More than half of the 200 students are non-traditional (24 years of age or older), 89% are women, and 15% represent multi-cultural backgrounds including African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American. Approximately 30% of the students are single parents, and 80% are currently employed. Some type of financial assistance is received by 75% of the students.



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