

Three Elements of Success: Attendance, Tutoring, and Advising

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Described as “tough love,” Louisiana State University at Eunice’s Pathways to Success program experienced success in its first two years by implementing mandatory placement, attendance, tutoring, and advising policies. Selected student successes and retention data are discussed, along with policies and some practical advice for developmental educators at other institutions who might wish to implement a similar program.

The need for and growth in developmental education has been well documented. In fact, between 40 percent and 63 percent of the students attending two-year institutions in the United States require developmental instruction in at least one subject (Kirst & Venezia, 2006; McCabe, 2000; Pollock, 2006; Schmidt, 2006). The Louisiana State University at Eunice (LSUE), an open-access public two-year institution of approximately 2,900 students, encounters many of the same issues faced by most higher education institutions including an increasing number of students requiring developmental education, students working while attending classes, and an increasing number of first generation college students. However, these issues have strained the institution’s ability to deal with the reality of the situation given the high poverty rates and low high school graduation rates indicative of the area (Bishaw & Iceland, 2003; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). For example, since developmental students could previously enroll themselves in classes after an initial meeting with their advisor, they would often enroll in classes for which they were not prepared, set up class schedules that were too demanding by scheduling all classes back to back, attempt a full-time course load while working full-time, and avoid tutoring and advising. In addition, even though the attendance policy stated that attendance for every class was expected, very little follow up occurred when students did not show up for class. Eventually, of course, students found themselves on academic probation and ineligible

for financial aid. Frankly, little was in place to assist students before they experienced difficulties, and institutional officials struggled to combat these types of issues. Consequently, campus leaders decided to address the situation head on by asking: How can we deal with the developmental education issue while increasing student success?

QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PLAN AND *PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS*

LSUE responded to this question by creating an institution-wide committee and by writing a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) in order to renew its accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (Quality Enhancement Plan Committee, 2003). The QEP, entitled *Pathways to Success: An Enhanced Educational Experience* is based on Boylan's (2002) *What Works: Research-Based Best Practices in Developmental Education*. The end result of the report and accreditation efforts was the creation of a centralized Office of Developmental Education in July 2004. Described as "tough love", the *Pathways to Success* program provides a structured learning environment that treats the "whole student" through academics, advising, monitoring of attendance, and support services. Students are automatically placed in the program if their ACT composite is 15 or less or if they have no ACT scores.

Once admitted, students are required to attend a one-day orientation covering everything from general LSUE procedures to detailed information on the *Pathways to Success* program. Each student sits down one-on-one with a *Pathways* advisor who then creates a personalized schedule for the student prior to the student leaving. Students are not permitted to enroll themselves for classes and actually have very little choice in the classes they may take. In addition, students in the program may take no more than four classes per semester and every effort is made to accommodate a student's work or personal schedule within limitations. For example, full-time students may take classes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, but only if they are willing to attend from eight or nine in the morning to two or three in the afternoon. Study, tutoring, and lunch breaks are built into the schedule by spreading out a student's classes throughout the day. Students may also attend classes five days per week which allows a student to leave campus before noon on most days; however, study and convenience breaks are still built into the schedule. First semester full-time students are not permitted to take courses on Tuesday and Thursday only because this requires a student to be in class from eight in the morning through two in the afternoon with no breaks.

Second semester students may take classes on a Tuesday Thursday schedule if high grades were obtained in the first semester.

At first, many students complained vehemently about the guidelines and scheduling requirements; however, most students have begun to believe that they need the extra help with becoming an adult and managing their time, as well as additional tutoring designed to address academic weaknesses. For example, two traditional-aged students who recently attended orientation concealed their ACT scores with a composite of 16 when they learned they would not have the same support structure since their ACT scores placed them out of the program. Institutional leaders have also seen an increase in the numbers of students who do not wish to take the math placement test simply because they realize they need some extra help and want to start at the beginning to ensure success in college. Finally, a few nontraditional students have also asked to be placed into the program due to its structure.

STUDENT ATTENDANCE

Students sign a “Contract for Success” that acknowledges their participation in orientation and their acceptance of the three key program guidelines: attendance, advising, and tutoring. First, students must attend class. Attendance for the *Pathways to Success* program is defined as being present from the time class is scheduled to begin until it is scheduled to end. Students who come in after the scheduled starting time or leave prior to the scheduled ending time can, at the discretion of the faculty member, be counted as absent. Students are required to attend 90 percent of their developmental courses, meaning that any student may miss approximately one full week of classes with no penalty. At orientation, students are informed that there are no excused absences and that they are to be in class when they are scheduled to be in class. Very simply, doctor’s appointments, caring for children, and other personal business should be conducted on their own time. Students who violate the attendance policy automatically fail the course and are sent an appeal letter both through standard mail and electronic mail to protect their due process rights. Students must then meet with the Director of Developmental Education and present appropriate documentation to explain why they were not in class in order to appeal the failing grade.

Appeals can be decided in any number of ways including consulting the faculty member for an opinion since the faculty member typically

knows the student better academically. Providing documentation, however, does not automatically guarantee the student will be reinstated to good standing in the class. Each case is decided on an individual basis by the program director and faculty member; the director then notifies the faculty member and student of the final decision via electronic mail. Students who fail to contact the director prior to the deadline date stated on the absence appeal automatically fail the course. The rigid attendance policy worked so well that the students now rarely miss days in general education classes where the attendance policy is not enforced.

TUTORING

Next, students must attend tutoring sessions with a faculty member or peer tutor. Tutoring forms mandating extra assistance for students are filled out and turned in to the departmental office when a student receives below a 70 percent or C- on a major assignment such as a test or major paper. The definition of a major assignment rests with the faculty in each department; faculty, if they wish, may also begin referring students to tutoring on the basis of quiz grades. Faculty members from the program tutor students on a first-come first-served drop-in basis approximately four hours a day while peer tutoring uses a Supplemental Instruction model requiring appointments and a formalized scheduling method. The Office of Developmental Education then tracks student tutoring by checking logs of both tutoring facilities weekly. Feedback is sent to the faculty via electronic mail regarding students' participation in tutoring.

Students also have the opportunity to use web-based electronic tutoring and digital video-tutor compact discs that come with the English composition and mathematics textbooks, which permits students the flexibility to be tutored at any time of the day or night if they have a computer at home that meets the textbook publishers' operating requirements. Students who use the face-to-face tutoring labs far outnumber the students who use the computerized tutoring since some students do not have computers or a high speed Internet connection at home. In addition, many students have difficulty downloading appropriate plug-ins and navigating the web based programs.

ADVISING

Students enrolled in the program must see their academic advisors at least three times per semester. These visits are mandated by the

Contract for Success that students sign at orientation and by the syllabi in the Strategies to Success and College Reading courses. To meet this requirement, two full-time advisors were hired for the program in spring 2005. In addition, one to three faculty from each division act as advisors for the *Pathways to Success* students and are trained by the director and two full-time advisors. University personnel make a conscious effort to build a relationship with the students during these visits, many times this involves explaining why the program guidelines are so rigid and the options are so limited.

Typically, during the first three weeks of the semester, the full-time advisors and the director are notified if a student is close to violating the attendance policy, not completing course work, not attending tutoring, or lacks the required materials for class. Students may be electronically mailed through their university account, called at home, called on their cell phone, stopped in the hall, pulled out of class, or visited at the campus housing facility to discuss the matter at hand. Most of the students, of course, believe that they are being hassled if this happens to them, but it is all part of a concentrated effort to keep students on track and attending class while continuously shaping their behavior so they are successful in their first year of college.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

In fall 2005, LSUE had a total of 2,954 students composed of 71 percent women and 19 percent men with an average age of 25. The ethnic makeup of the general student population was 71 percent Caucasian and 29 percent minority with 25 percent of the minority population being African American. Fifty-eight percent of the student body was full-time and just over 7 percent of them lived on campus. *Pathways to Success* had a total of 334 students composed of 76 percent women and 24 percent men with an average age of 23. Ethnic makeup of the group was 43 percent Caucasian and 57 percent minority with African Americans making up 54 percent of the minority subgroup. Eighty percent of the *Pathways* students were enrolled full-time.

IMMEDIATE RESULTS OF “TOUGH LOVE”

Within a few weeks of the first full semester in fall 2004, faculty began noticing that students were attending class and completing the course work. In fact, faculty believed that there was an immediate increase in student success during the first semester. However, since the program

was new, the director had no data to prove the speculation made by the faculty. As a result, the director began examining every piece of data on students with similar ACT composite scores as far back as the computer records would allow.

In essence, by taking a “tough love” attitude and mandating placement and course sequencing, rigidly enforcing the attendance policy, hiring two full-time advisors, enforcing the advising mandates, and mandating tutoring, success rates in the Strategies for Success course increased from 13 percent to 70 percent while the success rates for college reading increased from 63 percent to 74 percent in one year. The success rate for developmental English composition increased from 65 percent to 70 percent in two years. Students’ academic standing results were also examined for the first time in spring 2005. In just one year, the percentage of *Pathway* students in good academic standing (grade point average at or above 2.00) increased from 56 percent to 61 percent while the percentage of students placed on academic probation decreased from 40 percent to 17 percent. These results were duplicated at the end of the second year in spring 2006 when the percentage of students in good standing increased an additional 10 percent to 71 percent and those placed on academic probation decreased an additional 4 percent to 13 percent.

In addition, fall 2004 to spring 2005 retention for first time freshman students in the program increased from 63 percent to 75 percent in the first year and then another 4 percent the second year. Fall 2004 to fall 2005 retention data for first-time students was also analyzed and found to have increased from 30 percent to 49 percent. Three other results from the first two years were found to be equally interesting. The first was that the percentage of absence appeals based on the total number of students decreased by 3 percent. This decrease was rather surprising considering nine percent of the students enrolled in the program lived in areas that were devastated or had major damage from Hurricane Rita. Second, the percentage of students seeing their advisor continued to increase. For example, 88 percent of the students complied with the advising guideline in fall 2004 while 93 percent of the students complied in spring 2006. Lastly, efforts to enforce the tutoring requirements have also increased the percentage of students attending tutoring when assigned. Data indicated that only 16 percent of the students attended

their assigned tutoring in fall 2004 while 53 percent sought the required tutoring in spring 2006.

DISCUSSION

The *Pathways to Success* program at LSUE began to have an impact on students and faculty the first semester it was established. In fact, some faculty and staff began referring to the director as the “principal.” Since the program is a highly structured bridge program for those students who need some extra support and guidance, the term “principal” is probably appropriate. Additionally, even those who initially criticized the program have been astounded by the results. It has taken the efforts of the entire campus community to make the first two years of the program a success, especially the faculty and advisors who work with the students on a daily basis.

Most of the faculty members supported the program immediately even though *Pathways* created more work for them. First, the program increased their paperwork load. Advising, tutoring, and absence forms were created in order to monitor compliance with program guidelines. The second major impact to the faculty was an increased emphasis on instructional pedagogy for developmental students. A major training session for faculty is held on campus every semester covering such issues as the characteristics of developmental students, appropriate instructional methods, and procedural issues. Very simply, the willingness of the campus community to work collaboratively has spurred the success of the program.

Even with the enormous help of all involved, it is still difficult to keep up with routine matters during student registration, new student orientation, and the beginning and end of each semester. The three full-time staff members often have lines out the doors even though students are encouraged to make appointments. Despite this, students seem to understand that the majority of the faculty and staff care about them, are paying attention to their needs, and want them to succeed in their educational and life goals. This awareness was apparent by the results on an exit survey given to the students in their final university studies course. For instance, 89 percent of the students either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that LSUE helps students be successful in school while 92 percent agreed or strongly agreed that their instructors wanted them to succeed. In addition, 80 percent of the students agreed

or strongly agreed that their instructors taught in a way they could understand while 78 percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the orientation helped them understand the details of the program. As one might expect, only 33 percent of the students thought that the attendance policy was fair in the first year of the program; however, nearly two-thirds (62 percent) agreed or strongly agreed with it at the end of the second year.

CONCLUSIONS

While the *Pathways to Success* program at LSUE may be viewed by some to be overly restrictive and inflexible, the program has produced amazing results in just a short time as shown by the increase in success rates and overall retention rates. Additionally, despite criticism, the program does follow research best practices by providing a very structured environment while attending to students' educational needs, building relationships with students so they feel that faculty and staff care about them, and demanding that students take coursework that progresses toward a degree or certificate in order to meet their life long goals (Boylan, 2002; McCabe, 2000; Stewart, Brewer, & Brown Wright, 2006; Tinto, 2004).

As one might expect, there is one caveat. A program of this type is not for all institutions. Developmental educators and institutional leadership should evaluate their positions on the topics discussed in this paper before embarking on a plan to implement a similar program. For instance, student guidelines must not change midstream and the executive leadership should not override the director's decisions unless a legal issue exists or there has been a clear violation of due process. Constant communication is a must since all constituencies involved must work collaboratively in order to strive for increased student success. LSUE's program director reports to the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs so communication may remain open with the faculty through the academic division heads. This also maintains the rigor and academic excellence desired by establishing two-way communication and frequently involves discussions about what is not working to the benefit of the students. Student expectations in the first college level courses are also communicated to developmental educators in this manner, so communication with the senior academic officer, division heads, or deans, and faculty is imperative.

Next, institutional leaders should consider whether they believe an enrollment decline will result due to the implementation of a similar program. While LSUE has seen enrollment fluctuations since the *Pathways to Success* program was implemented, the enrollment fluctuations have been across all segments of the student population and may actually reflect the low unemployment rate in the area (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). In addition, institutional officials believe that high fuel costs and the rebuilding efforts due to the 2005 hurricanes in the area have also impacted the LSUE's enrollment. The program director and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs meet regularly to examine possible impacts to the student population due to changing policies as the *Pathways to Success* program is implemented.

In addition, the developmental education office must collaborate and work as a team with faculty and staff. First, constant communication and collaboration with the Admissions Office and Registrar's Office are of the utmost importance. Included is an open dialogue with the clerical staff as well since they are often the first people a student encounters face-to-face at the institution. Clerical staff often alerts the director and Registrar to possible logistical problems as new policies are implemented.

Lastly, working as a team using communication and collaboration also means that faculty will not shout "academic freedom" at every opportunity, but faces change with a positive outlook toward improving instruction. Conversely, developmental education personnel must also respect the wishes of the faculty; however, both groups must keep in mind that the focus should be toward increasing student performance. The student success rates and the overall attitude at LSUE indicate that most involved do just that. Consensus is reached and then change is integrated incrementally in order to work toward more effective instruction for a diverse population. The bottom line is that there are many individual voices synergistically creating a single collaborative voice shouting one goal in harmony—do what is best for the students.

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