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START! The Successful Transitions and Retention Track Program: A Comprehensive Approach to Supporting GED Holders Entering College

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Abstract

Students entering college face many obstacles to success. Students who received a General Education Development (GED) face additional barriers that must be addressed in order for success in higher education. The Successful Transitions and Retention Track Program employs a holistic approach to addressing the needs of GED holders entering college.

Introduction

Although the importance of higher education in career success is critical, less is known regarding how to address the barriers preventing success in degree programs (Reder, 2007). This is particularly true for students who achieved a GED (Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010). Students who hold GEDs and seek involvement in higher education may face barriers including recidivism (e.g., substance abuse), economic or family distress, pressures of being a first generation student, etc. The abundance of obstacles facing GED holders entering college may influence student persistence and retention. Patterson, et al. (2010) indicated that among individuals who received their GED in 2003, only 42.9 % of participants (n = 148,000) chose to pursue further education. These results reflect what we know to be true among the larger population of GED holders as well (CAAL, 2008; Duke & Ganzglass, 2007; Murnane, Willett, & Tyler, 2000; Reder, 1999;

Tyler, 2005). Given the necessity of education on life satisfaction and the numerous hurdles GED holders face, it is imperative to provide holistic support to students; the Successful Transitions and Retention Track (START) Program at Idaho State University is an example of this holistic support.

START is a two-year pilot project, funded by the J. A. & Katheryn Albertson Foundation, intended to increase retention among GED holders entering college. START is an Idaho initiative intended to measurably increase education access, retention, and success for non-traditional students. It is critical for professionals to understand that students face many systemic, cultural, and emotional obstacles. With those challenges in mind, the START program's mission is *to provide social and academic support as GED students manage barriers while they pursue sustainable career and life goals*. START emphasizes three components: *Classroom Instruction, Career & Personal Counseling, and Math/English tutoring*.

Classroom Instruction

The "Personal and Professional Effectiveness" (PPE) course introduces career exploration and assists students in becoming effective learners. This course enhances the traditional first year college preparation course by focusing on creating learning opportunities, solidifying a set of transferable skills, and values clarification. The emphasis on values clarification is based on the concepts of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Pizzolato, 2003) and Learning Partnership Model (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Baxter Magolda (2001) asserts that universities utilize a formula that overemphasizes the power and expertise of advisors, administrators, and faculty members, and underemphasizes the power and expertise of students. Many students have challenged the ideals and principles of this formula by dropping out of traditional education programs. The first step of self-authorship is moving away from formula following (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Students in START have already challenged this formula by pursuing alternatives to a traditional high school education and therefore are ready to develop self-authorship through values-based decision making upon entering START.

Career and Personal Counseling

The numerous considerations students face while entering college can significantly increase the level of emotional trauma one experiences. With the emphasis on a holistic perspective, START created a Personal Effectiveness Action Plan (PEAP) that supports students in addressing numerous barriers. Working in groups, students explore topics such as stress-reduction. Students are required to receive career counseling and are offered optional personal sessions with licensed counselors and supervised counseling interns.

Tutoring

START offers math and English tutoring for students in addition to the required English and math

skillshops. English tutoring prepares students to be successful in critical reflection and writing. Math tutoring is structured around how math is used in particular careers. . The tutoring component of START remains synchronous with all other components including the PEAP workshops and classroom instruction.

Conclusion

The START Project illustrates how retention, as a process rather than an outcome, may yield significant positive experiences for adult GED holders. Early results (70 % persistence rate, 3.5 GPA) indicate that START initiatives are preparing students for academic, personal and professional success. Essential first steps involve developing curriculum that emphasizes values based decision making, providing holistic support in services such as counseling, and offering additional opportunities for mentorship and tutoring.

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