

Quality Enhancement Plan Topic Proposal

Student Readiness: A Student Services Perspective

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The Issue

How can El Centro College adequately address the challenge of serving a significant proportion of students, who enter its doors, unprepared to meet both academic and non-cognitive college level expectations? The answers to this complex question, as one might expect, are likewise complex and multifaceted. Moreover, this question is not unique to El Centro but is common amongst colleges and universities across the country. While priorities and perspectives vary greatly amongst El Centro students, faculty, administrators and staff, there is a common concern amongst all when it comes to student college readiness—or perhaps more accurately, student “un-readiness”. This paper is an attempt to evoke thought regarding college readiness issues and possible solutions for El Centro College, from a student services and support perspective.

What *is* College Readiness?

First, to reasonably identify challenges and possible solutions in addressing college readiness, one must try to determine, *what exactly is college readiness?* Well, research says—there isn’t a single definition (Haycock, 2006). Many states in the U.S. allow colleges to set their own definitions for college readiness. The vast majority of these definitions are monolithic in that they focus solely on academic readiness, by way of placement test scores. According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, college readiness is defined as the reading, writing, and communication skills and knowledge that college students need to succeed in general education college coursework (THECB, 2010). In an attempt to assess readiness, by this definition, the state began implementing the Texas Success Initiative in 2003, which requires colleges to prove that students have met state guidelines for reading, writing and math prior to allowing student enrollment in respective college level courses. Consequently, students who do not meet minimum scores are placed into

development courses. Developmental courses are designed to remediate students so that they will be prepared for college level work. National statistics indicate that 40 percent of admitted and enrolled students take at least one remedial course (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Community college remedial course enrollment is at a much higher rate. In fall 2008, 79 percent of all new El Centro College students enrolled in at least one developmental course (PAR, 2010). Working to remediate such a percentage of students comes with a great expense of money and time for the student and the college, alike (Reed, 2005).

Non-Cognitive Impacts on College Readiness

While academic preparedness issues must certainly be at the forefront of college readiness concerns, we must ask ourselves are we assessing any characteristics or traits that are not assessed on a placement exam that would determine if a student is “college ready?” Characteristics that Eric Hoover coins as ,“non-cognitive” such as leadership, motivation, personal responsibility, connectedness, goals, and emotional intelligence may also provide us with valuable information to help gauge readiness. For example, the 2009 ECC SENSE survey, which focuses on the early college experiences of first-time-in-college (FTIC) students, showed that ECC ranked significantly lower than the benchmark average of other comparable colleges who completed the same survey in the areas of “Establishing Early Connections” and “Providing Clear Academic Plans and Pathways” (PAR, 2009). This is valuable feedback that should pose questions to the college on how can we improve within what may seemingly be non-cognitive areas, such that we increase the chances for students’ success? Hoover posits that colleges must make conscientious efforts to systematically measure such non-cognitive traits and respond accordingly (2008).

Proposed Solutions

To address college readiness, I am proposing the following actions:

- **Systematic Assessment of Non-Cognitive Behaviors**- El Centro should invest in a “withdrawal prone” assessment instrument, designed to identify attitudes at the entering point of college that would give indicators for attrition or failure. Examples of instruments that might be used include Noel-Levitz’s,

College Student Inventory; Hallberg and Davis', College Success Factors Index; or Baker and Shultz's, Anticipated Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (Cuseo, 2007).

- **New Student Orientation (NSO) Requirement**- In an effort to establish early college connectedness, El Centro should make New Student Orientation a requirement prior to student initial enrollment. Institutional data shows that students who attend NSO have higher rates of success, retention and grade point average. We currently offer NSO and actually use the verbiage that it is "required", but do not enforce any consequence if it is skipped. According to the ECC PAR office in fall 2009 only 18 percent of FTIC students attended NSO. An increase to 21 percent of FTIC student participation occurred in spring 2010. Perhaps we can increase the number of students who receive the valuable information provided at NSO if it is a requirement prior to enrollment, as opposed to an option. Additionally, if this was required, the before mentioned attrition indicator instrument could be administered at NSO.
- **College Preview Day**- "Frontloading is a process of intentionally exposing participants to vocabulary, concepts, and skills that they will later learn in the school day or in future program activities (DCYF, 2009)". My vision of college preview days are to expose the community—ultimately potential students—to college resources and processes. After attending a preview day, a potential student should be able to make a decision as to whether or not El Centro College is a good choice for them, because they will have understood what they can expect from the college as well as what the college expects from them.
- **Enhanced High School Connections**- One of the major causes of college UN-readiness in basic subject areas (reading, writing and math) is the lack of continuity from high school to college. Much of this is caused by a lack of knowledge by high school teachers as to what a student needs to know, specifically. One solution would be to implement regular, ongoing collaboration between college and high school faculty. English faculty would meet often with English high school faculty to align curriculums. History college faculty would collaborate with high school history teachers to promote mutual understanding of what might be learned in high school that will smooth the transition to college history. This would of course require a lot of diplomatic politicking as well as collaboration time.

Expanding college readiness awareness (both academic and non-cognitive) for high school students, by possibly offering preview days designed for specific schools could enhance high school relationships. Lastly, reporting back to high schools on the college performance of students who graduate from their respective campus could provide valuable data to help identify deficiencies in program alignment. For ECC, this would involve working closely with the DISD schools, especially those in our service area.

- **Common FTIC Course Components within all EDUC and PSYT courses**- All new to college students should theoretically be placed in one of these courses. Although one is technical (PSYT 1313) and the other focuses on learning theory (EDUC 1300), I propose that a discipline committee of credentialed faculty for each course respectively list college etiquette, career planning and degree planning as core components and include these items within the confines for the learning outcomes of the course. For example, if critical thinking is a learning outcome for EDUC 1300, an activity centered on critical thought as it applies to a career choice could be incorporated. This is an effort to connect students early both to the college and to an overarching pathway for their own success. Also, course offerings for these classes must be designed to actually supply the demand needed to accommodate all FTIC students. Advisors must make increased efforts to ensure that FTIC students are actually enrolled in one of these two courses. According to the ECC PAR office **52.6 percent of FTIC students were not enroll in either EDUC 1300 or PSYT 1313 for fall 2010**. Clearly, knowledge that over half of new incoming students are missing critical information within the first semester is unacceptable.
- **Split Advising Model (Advisors & Faculty)** - Currently there is an approximate ratio of one advisor for every 1000 students enrolled in the District. With these figures, it is unreasonable to expect high quality advising for each student. According to the National Academic Advising Association (Pardee, 2004) the split model of advising is one of the most common models used at 2 yr. colleges. The Split model of advising is where departmental faculty and an advising center staff advise students. Within this model, the advising staff focuses on new college students, students who are on probation, students who have not declared a major or who are working on pre-requisites to enter into a specialty program. Once students are more certain of their directed academic path they are assigned to a faculty member within their discipline of interest. Implementing such a model would first require campus wide

conversations regarding time, compensation, logistics and training. Even with use of this model, the advising center will have to seek ways to incorporate expanded use of group advising. There has been some pilot group advising efforts made this fall, but there is definitely room for expansion.

- **Staff Development-** Ongoing opportunities for faculty and staff to stay abreast of the most recent data, trends and best practices in providing service to students is critical for successful implementation for all of the above listed activities.

In conclusion, I will end my proposal with a quote from Arlene Wesley Cash, Spelman College vice president for enrollment management who says, "College readiness is something like good art. It is hard to define, and everyone will have a different take on it, depending on their perspective. However, I think we can agree that we can agree...that we know it when we see it (Hoover, 2008)." With meaningful discussion, student-centered intent, and solid plans for implementation, I believe that we can indeed improve college readiness for El Centro students, and thereby, improve their chances for success.

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