



HCCC First Year Experience: Roadmap to Success

The Education Trust has reported that overall nationally, slightly more than 35% of college freshmen do not become college sophomores.

Hudson County Community College (HCCC) is an urban institution serving one of the most densely populated and ethnically diverse areas of the United States. The students who attend HCCC reflect the demographics of Hudson County. Many of the students are immigrants – or children of immigrants. (Nearly 58% of Hudson County residents speak a language other than English in their homes.) Many are the first-ever in their families to pursue a college education. More than 90% of all HCCC students receive financial aid and/or scholarships.

Like its urban peer institutions in Northern New Jersey, Hudson County Community College's fall-to-fall retention rate for Fall 2012 was slightly over 50% for first-time, full-time students, and nearly 40% for first-time, part-time students.

The nonpartisan research group Public Agenda released a report a few years back showing that 7 out of 10 students who drop out of college leave for financial reasons, and that most of those students were working and going to school at the same time. A 2011 Harvard University study also cited financial concerns one of the top reasons for students leaving college before graduating. Other factors that contribute to college students becoming dropout statistics are: being unprepared for college work; personal and family problems; and not having a support system at their college/not feeling a part of their college.

“When students don't complete their college education, it's costly not only to them and their families, it's costly to our community as well,” said Dr. Glen Gabert, President of Hudson County Community College. “In today's competitive economy, it's essential that we have educated men and women who can meet the expectations of the jobs and careers that are relevant now and as well as those that will be relevant in the future.”

HCCC realized that better accommodating students with evening and weekend classes was a starting point, and expanded its schedule of courses. The College also determined that there needed to be a more thorough and ongoing process of orienting first-time students and helping them succeed in completing their college education.

In the summer of 2013, HCCC launched its multifaceted “First Year Experience” program, which guides students from application through graduation. “We know that many of our students do not have parents, family members or friends who can help them



navigate their college journey, and so it's up to us to assist them. We literally have drawn out the program like a roadmap for first-time students," said Dr. Paula Pando, the HCCC Vice President for the North Hudson Center and Student Affairs, whose division is responsible for the implementation of the "First Year Experience" program. She added that students are provided with lists of things they need to do between application and their first day of class, as well as "must-dos" for each term and each academic year. The roadmap also includes a detailed guide to "who can help" with financial aid, advisement, counseling, activities, tutorial and transfer services at HCCC.

The HCCC "First Year Experience" begins with a mandatory orientation program for new students that is available via in-person or online formats. The orientation helps students make the transition to college as easily as possible, assists in preparing them for the first days of classes, and provides some of the tools needed for the journey to graduation.

The program also includes a two-week series of events that are intended to help students connect to the College and with their fellow students.

A newly designed "College Student Success" course assists students in gaining the skills to succeed academically, thrive interpersonally, choose and act responsibly, and determine and clarify career goals; this one-credit, transferable course is offered in-person and online.

The "First Year Experience" program calls for students to then proceed to: meet with an advisor and map out their educational plan; work with the HCCC Financial Aid counselors and develop financial literacy; connect and work with fellow students in the HCCC peer-mentoring program; attend a variety of academic, career and personal workshops (40 in-person and 25 online); participate in special social activities on campus with fellow students, faculty and administrators; engage in community service events; and meet with admissions representatives from other colleges for possible transfer to four-year institutions.

The results from Hudson County Community College's "first Year Experience" program has been encouraging – there was a 4.38% increase in retention this year.

"We are dedicated to making sure our students have all they need to complete their college education," Dr. Gabert said. "Developing and implementing a 'First Year Experience' program that is actually tailored to each student's particular needs is a giant step towards meeting that mission."

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