DEVELOP STRATEGIES TO CLOSE THE GAPS

Research Proven Strategies and Practices

SUMMARY

Prerequisites
- Best Practice in Community College Budgeting, 2A — Develop Goals to Guide the Budgeting and Planning Process
- Best Practice in Community College Budgeting, 2B — Identify the Gaps between the Goals and Current State and Determine the Root Causes of those Gaps

Key Points
- To close the gap between the college’s current and desired states, it should review practices that researchers have proven effective in improving college performance to determine if these practices are appropriate for its own plan and budget.
- For example, with over half of high school students entering community college behind in their readiness for college-level coursework, a college may want to explore ways to help students plan, initiate, and sustain success. It may use proven strategies such as orientation to help prepare students for the college environment and first-year programs to build relationships with other students, faculty, and staff. A college may also explore strategies to support students struggling to complete the program.
- After adopting the proven strategies, it is important for a college to provide resources for faculty to meet regularly to examine course and program outcomes and to refine the programs and strategies as necessary. In addition, a college should provide faculty and staff with professional development opportunities that reinforce efforts that help to close achievement gaps and improve overall student success.

Related Award Program Criteria
- Criterion 3.A.1: Institutional Priorities (Mandatory). The applicant has developed a set of institutional priorities as demonstrated by the presentation of the institutional priorities in the supplementary materials. The applicant can provide research citations and/or other references of research in support of the development of the institutional priorities in the supplementary materials. Note that the applicant does not necessarily have to use the term “institutional priorities” in its budgeting process or document — any term is acceptable as long as the underlying concept is met.
Introduction
After a community college has developed a set of SMARTER goals, identified gaps between the desired goal state and the college’s current condition, and performed a root cause analysis on those gaps, it must find ways to close those gaps. Many of those goals and gaps will relate directly to optimizing student achievement. Hence, the starting point is to research strategies and practices that have effectively optimized student achievement elsewhere.

This best practice document provides an overview of the strategies and practices that have been shown to be effective for improving student learning in community colleges.

I. Proven Strategies and Practices for Optimizing Student Achievement

Background. A college’s budgeting process must identify potentially effective strategies and practices to optimize student achievement so that these practices can be supported by action planning and budget allocations. This begins by starting the budgeting and planning process early enough to allow time to perform research and consider new methods. Research into new and effective strategies and practices must also be rooted in an understanding of where the college has not met its desired goals and the root causes for that condition. This helps focus research and the consideration of new strategies and practices in the areas that matter most.

Recommendation. This document describes a number of strategies and practices that have been proven effective by professional researchers. A college should reflect on these practices and determine the role that they might play in the college’s own plan and budget for meeting student achievement goals.

Helping Students to Plan for Success

In the United States, 60 percent of recent high school graduates enter community college already behind in their readiness for college-level coursework. This suggests that community colleges should make a concerted effort to help students plan to be successful in college. Specific practices colleges should consider include:

- **New approaches to placement.** Research suggests that traditional approaches to placement tests produce suboptimal accuracy rates. Accurate assessment is critical because students who enroll in needed developmental education courses during the first term are more likely to complete their developmental sequence. Colleges can take a variety of approaches to refining their placement strategies and procedures, including taking high school grades into account, expanding the grounds for waiving placement exams (e.g., sufficient high school GPA), aligning placement exams better with the college curricula so that they are more accurate predictors of success, enhancing the diagnostic value and use of the exams in order to justify the investment in a more precise testing instrument, and better preparing students to take the exams.

- **Orientation.** Research shows that mandatory student orientations lead to higher student satisfaction, greater use of student support services, and improved retention of at-risk students. Common components of orientation are information about and/or use of the college’s personal/social support services; information about and/or use of the college’s academic support network; and use of information resources (e.g., library, finding and evaluating sources).

Finding Other Practices

It is likely that a college will need to identify new strategies and practices besides those documented here. For example, a new scheduling practice or new sources of revenue may be needed. Colleges are encouraged to network with peers, consult professional journals and associations, and take other steps to find solid ideas as necessary.
Learning More About What Works
Community colleges should consult the following organizations’ websites to learn more about effective practices for improving student learning:

- Achieving the Dream
- The Community College Research Center
- Completion by Design

• Academic goal setting and planning. This encompasses course selection, but also identification of long-term goals with students. Colleges should help students set long-term goals, identify the plan to achieve the goals, and help them to update the plan and goals as circumstances suggest.9

Initiating Success
After planning for success, community colleges should invest resources in helping students to start college successfully.10 Specific practices colleges should consider include:

• Accelerating developmental education. Research suggests that accelerated developmental education models lead to improved outcomes for developmental students.11 Examples of methods to accelerate developmental education include mainstreaming higher-level developmental students and teaching developmental materials in the context of the student’s chosen field of study (e.g., basic math for nursing).

• First-year experience programs. These programs help first-year students build relationships with other students, faculty, and staff. Common components of these programs are time management skill training and provision of information on academic and non-academic support services.12 Participating students demonstrate better relations with faculty, better time management skills, and greater awareness of support resources.13

• College success course. Colleges can offer courses on skills such as note-taking, time management, and study skills. Students who complete these courses are more likely to complete other courses, earn better grades, and obtain degrees.14

• Learning community. Learning communities are small groups of students taking two or more linked classes together. Ideally, the instructors coordinate the content of the courses and jointly review student progress. Learning communities may contribute to higher grades, credit accumulation, and greater learning satisfaction.15

Sustaining Success
Colleges should work to sustain the success of their students through to terminal completion.16 In particular, effective colleges provide targeted support for struggling students, especially where there are systematic gaps between different segments of students.17 Sustaining success can take a variety of forms including:

• Tutoring. Research suggests that participation in tutoring is associated with higher GPAs and pass rates.18 Tutoring is often conducted one on one, but could be done in small groups or online.

• Supplemental instruction. Supplemental instruction is a regular, supplemental class for a portion of students enrolled in a larger course section. Research suggests that students participating in supplemental instruction earn higher grades than non-participating students.19

• Encouraging class attendance. Colleges should consider steps to encourage regular attendance at classes, as attendance has been shown to be a powerful predictor of academic performance.20 For example, colleges that use an alert system that flags students who miss more than three class periods have higher completion rates.

• Proactive identification and referral. Colleges should proactively identify struggling students in their courses and refer them to assistance.21 Research suggests that when colleges alert students to their academic difficulties, students are more likely to successfully complete the course and to persist in their program of study.22

• Experiential learning beyond the classroom. Internships, apprenticeships, clinical assignments, and other “hands-on” experiences enhance students’ skills and help them develop professional networks.23

Ongoing Curriculum Development
Community colleges should provide resources for faculty to meet regularly to examine course and
program outcomes for addressing achievement gaps and improving student success, and to assess programs and teaching strategies from the perspective of current research on effective practice.24

**Professional Development is Aligned with Strategies to Improve Student Success**

Colleges should provide faculty and staff with professional development opportunities that reinforce efforts to close achievement gaps and improve overall student success. In particular, colleges should provide training to faculty and staff on using data and research to improve programs and services.25

Endnotes

3 The grouping of practices suggested by the work of the Center for Community College Student Engagement in “A Matter of Degrees: Promising Practices for Community College Student Success (A First Look)” (Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Community College Leadership Program, 2012).
8 Center for Community College Student Engagement, “A Matter of Degrees.”
9 Ibid.
10 The grouping of practices suggested by the work of the Center for Community College Student Engagement, “A Matter of Degrees.”
12 Center for Community College Student Engagement, “A Matter of Degrees.”
15 Ibid.
16 Category of solutions suggested by the work of the Center for Community College Student Engagement, “A Matter of Degrees.”
Center for Community College Student Engagement, “A Matter of Degrees” cites M. Crede, S.G. Roch, and U.M. Kieszczynka, “Class Attendance in College: A Metaanalytic Review of the Relationship of Class Attendance with Grades and Student Characteristics,” *Review of Educational Research* 80, no. 2 (June 2010): 272–295. However, the CCCSE also notes that there is little research on the effectiveness of community college attendance policies as means to improve attendance.

Jenkins, “Institutional Effectiveness and Student Success.”


Center for Community College Student Engagement, “A Matter of Degrees.”


Ibid.