

Bridging the Gap between Admission and Graduation: A QEP Plan for Student Services

Submitted

by

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### **Abstract**

This paper will discuss the need for a Quality Enhancement Plan in the department of student services at Brevard Community College (BCC). A survey was sent out in the spring of 2011 to the students of BCC, asking them what the college could do to help them be more successful as a student. Many comments had to do with student services and more specifically, advising. (See Appendix for all comments related to Student Services). This writer will server to prove that the students of BCC will benefit from a QEP that improves the advising process and sets forth a clear, concise plan for the student to begin in the first few weeks of school and carry them through to graduation. There will be many examples of how other colleges have handled this issue as well as a proposed plan of action for the upcoming QEP. This writer has chosen to include actual statements from the student survey that will be shown in italics throughout the paper. Some of these statements are difficult to hear, but will serve to prove the point, which is that BCC needs to improve or enhance the current student services process.

### **The Need for Improvement in Student Services is Essential**

The community college environment is changing. The population continues to grow. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2009) “Nationally, the number of students enrolled in credit-bearing courses at community colleges in fall 2009 increased by 11.4% from fall 2008 and 16.9% from fall 2007. Full-time enrollment at U.S. community colleges increased 24.1% in a 2-year time period from fall 2007 to fall 2009” (p.4). Students are changing from what they once were. With today’s economy, we have a lot of returning students who are much older than the traditional student. Over 35% of the students enrolled at BCC in the fall of 2010 were over the age of twenty-five. Some of these students have lost their jobs and are returning to school, after many years. On the opposite end of the spectrum are the dual-enrollment students. Many parents are encouraging 14-17 year old students to attend community college because of the economic gain or to give them a “heads up” in the real world. In the fall of 2010 BCC admitted 15.2% of students that were 17 and under. We have first time in college students (1940 who enrolled in fall of 2010) and then we have those students who were at the university and now cannot afford to go there because tuition has increased so much. Florida’s 11 public universities raised tuition by 15 percent for the 2010-11 academic year. If this is added to the increase of the 2009-10 school year, there is a two-year increase of 32 percent. (Johnson, Olif, & Williams, 2011). So there are students that may be forced to go the community college route because there is no choice. We also have a large number of part-time students. In the spring 2011, 63% of Brevard Community College students were part-time by terms end. Many students are choosing to take classes on-line as opposed to face to face and this also decreases their connection to the school, to other students, and to the services that are available to them. There is

a very diverse student population in terms of motivation level, comfort level, academic level, and emotional maturity.

Even though this mix of students may be worlds apart they have some similarities. They may be underprepared academically and/or emotionally for community college. They may have anxiety related to how they will fit into the classroom environment; will they be able to keep up with the traditional student both academically and socially? They may have resentment over having to attend community college when their heart is at the university. They may be wondering how they will be able to handle their other obligations, be it children, jobs, chores, high school, fighting in combat, or getting a driver's license. Although academics are one factor of vulnerability, non-academic factors are often overwhelming for these non-tradition students. Students need to be able to understand the importance of education as a priority and that is sometimes difficult when juggling personal issues. It is more difficult for the non-traditional student (part-timers, those over 25 and under 18, minorities, first timers) to set Higher Education as a priority. Student services is the entry point at which the students introduced to college life. It is through student services that a student plans, solidifies and carries through their goal to graduation. Are these needs being met by BCC? To follow are a couple of comments made on the student survey that was sent out to all of the students in an attempt to choose a topic for our Quality Enhancement Program. The question posed was, "What should BCC do to help you become more successful as a student?"

*"First I would have to say that the student advisors should be more thorough when explaining each program to students and realize that a good percentage of us students are in our 30's and 40's and not just starting out in college and in life, therefore we should be advised with completeness and feel as though we have a chance. I cannot tell you how many students I have spoken to (myself included) who have been incorrectly advised and have not been able to apply for a program because of prerequisites that we were not told about or a points system that was not explained to us in detail. It can be quite disappointing."*

*“I have return to school after twenty plus years. It possible to have an Advisor or someone in the appropriate field hold a symposium or a pep talk for lack of a better word, on going forward in the career one chooses or possible changing direction before one becomes overwhelmed or discouraged.”*

*“Advisors should advise more and help students understand programs better. Especially new students.”*

Karp (2011) discusses the importance of integration and commitment when looking at retention rates and student satisfaction. She said that it is vital for students to get help in solidifying their goals in order to make it through to graduation. She references Vincent Tinto from Syracuse University who was a pioneer in looking at student retention and dropout rates. It was thirty-six years ago that he began to write about this issue and this research is still a hot topic. He looked at two forms of integration, academic and social, and professed that the amount of integration in these two categories had a profound impact on commitment and therefore student success. He felt that the student needs to buy into the idea of being a student, being a part of the institution, and being on the road to having a higher degree. The high school student may feel torn, the university student resentful, the older student scared, the first time in college student, apprehensive, and the on-line students, out of the loop. Grubb (2006) said that students who do not have clear goals and a real understanding of why college is important and worthwhile to them, are likely to be thwarted by minor challenges and setbacks. And as discussed earlier, the community college student has many areas that make them vulnerable to challenges. The question arises on how to engage a student that may not be committed to the school or to education.

More than 25 years after Tinto’s research, another survey was developed called The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) with the goal in mind to increase the student success rate in community college by finding out what really engages the student. This survey looked not only at the high standards in academics, but at the student environment.

The study looked at five categories that were tied to student engagement: academic challenges, student-faculty interaction, active and collaborative learning, student effort, and support for learners . The full report for this survey and the CCSSE can be found at [www.ccsse.org](http://www.ccsse.org). Two areas that stood out in the survey were orientation and advisement. The survey showed that 89% of the students said advising was important, two-thirds of the students said it was very important, but one third of the students said that they rarely or never used advising. Only forty percent of the students surveyed said that they had or intended to attend an orientation.

One finding that came from the 2007 administration of the CCSSE study was the importance of engaging the student early on. This particular survey looked at what services students need, but are not receiving, in the first four weeks of college. The findings pointed out that about half of the community college students failed to discuss any goals with an advisor and about one third did not attend orientation (Ashburn, 2007).

*“Help students receive more productive advice. In my situation I spoke with an adviser, telling them I was trying to become an architect and I was never told about the program offered at another community college. I makes me think, was I not told because I would be using my money elsewhere or were the few advisers I spoke with all unaware of it. Food for thought”.*

*“I am graduating next semester and I was unaware of some student services that were available to me. For example, I did not know about TRIO and I did qualify for these services.*

*” Because we don't know the process, we, the students miss out on information that directly effects us. Also, with the Melbourne career center seemingly closed a lot, I am confused on the next step in making my career choices; i.e.. what I need, with what I got. I find myself trying to figure it all out myself. Help would be nice.”*

The statistics from the CCSSE led to another survey by developer, Kay M. McClenney, that looks at the community college student’s experience in the first few weeks of school. The survey is called The Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) ([www.ccssee.org](http://www.ccssee.org)) and the statistics were not any more comforting. Only 38 percent of students surveyed said they

attended an on-campus orientation and 20% said they were not even aware that there was an orientation. Here are some interesting statistics taken from the 2007 survey:

As reported by the SENSE, students at 22 community colleges reported the following statistics in the first three weeks of school:

- 23% needed some sort of developmental class
- 40% said that they used friends, family or other students as their primary source for academic advising
- 29% said a financial-aid staff member had helped them with their needs
- 41% said they had never used academic planning services
- 20% said they “strongly agreed” with “The very first time I came to this college, I felt welcome.”

Oriano-Darnall (2008), Assistant Director, Survey of Entering Student Engagement emphasizes that the experience that students have in the first few days are imperative to whether they return and eventually graduate. She found that in the Florida community college system there was a significant number of students that earn no credit during their first semester. She also found that the non-return rate for second semester was 25% for the State of Florida. It is also typical for a community college to lose half of their new students after the first year. The Brevard Community College statistics for the fall of 2010 did not fall too short of the state statistic. There was 24% of enrolled students that did not return back after the Spring semester, and 40% after the first year.

Libby Sander (2008), in her article “At Community Colleges, a Call to Meet Students at the Front Door” agreed that it is important to reach students early. She emphasized the importance of the first impression of the institution and how the first few weeks could determine if a student

continues their journey, or turns and walks away. She discussed how the SENSE survey suggested reaching out to the students early and aggressively in such areas as orientation and academic advising. It is clear that we need to look at engaging the student early on, in getting them to visit the advisors and to attend orientation and to integrate both socially and academically so that they can be proud of their status as a student and become passionate about completing their degree. Often the person's initial contact person is the one that sets the pathway to determine the student's passion for, or lack of passion for their life as a college student.

*“Not a student. I am employee. One thing BCC can do-Student advisors need to be building classes around the student's program, rather than building a program around the student's classes. Students need to be working towards completion of a degree as soon as they walk in the door.”*

Karp, Gara, & Hughes (2008) also spoke of the issue of student's lack of involvement with advising and lack of attendance at orientation. Though this is a controversial issue, they pointed the onus of control to the institution rather than the student. They felt that student services that had open access, were easy to use, and offered a wide range of services were detrimental, perhaps overwhelming. The college is expecting the student to know where to go and what to do and they simply are not doing it. Rosenbaum (2006) agreed by castigating the structure of the college and inferring that whether the student succeeds has more to do with the structure of the college than the behavior/characteristics of the students.

### **The Problem Defined:**

If a student does not become engaged in the first few weeks of school, he/she is less likely to develop a goal and also less likely to graduate. Students are not attending orientation and are not taking advantage of the student services that are available to them. Students are

getting through the first few weeks of school without a clear plan for their future. Students are not feeling welcome in the first few weeks of school.

*"I realize they have a lot of work and probably get a lot of questions that seem stupid or simple, but it would help a great deal if, when a person presents himself/herself, waits, sometimes for quite a while, that administrative person would give all the information a person ever needed to know about their question. I have many times gone through this process and been given the brief answer to my question and not the entire story or instruction, only to find out there was something else I was supposed to do that I wasn't informed of the first time. Especially if it is a busy time is when personnel need to take their time with each customer and not give them the short version so that they have to come back, OR, Heaven forbid, try to call."*

As statistics have shown, if a student does not have academic and social integration early on, their motivation to succeed lessens. Students see advising and orientation as the most important factors in their success, yet they are not engaging in these activities. A large number of students are not returning after the first semester and just as many are not coming back the second year. Over half of the students that were admitted to BCC in the fall of 2010 had left by the following fall. Granted, new students were admitted, but as Murray (2010) so eloquently put it, "The question is not how to find the students, but how to help them once enrolled" (p. 34).

### **Historical Approach by other Institutions:**

Many colleges have taken a stand to fight against the issue of student non-engagement or disinterest in completion to graduation. Administrators at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College in Richmond, VA were not surprised by the results of their survey that showed that their students rarely used advising or career counseling services. In the summer of 2005 they started a new program developed to change that trend. Their new preventative program presents a campus tour, career counseling, and face to face academic advisement prior to registration. They also

have follow up sessions every semester until the students reach the two year status (Ashburn, 2006).

Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, TX has a population that is predominantly Hispanic and first generation college students. They were lucky enough to receive a grant that allowed the school to offer personal coaching services to the students. The coach's task was to motivate the students, identify services that they were in need of (financial aid, career counseling, mental health counseling, welfare services, etc), offer encouragement and positive reinforcement, as well as time management skills. The students work directly with the coaches to determine their personal and academic goals. They have weekly meetings where the coaches help them incorporate their goals to their lifestyle. There is an emphasis on prevention and the approach is very proactive. The preliminary results of the summer pilot program showed that 89% of the freshman came back and 93% of students who attended at least seven coaching sessions returned the following semester.

Frederick Community College in Maryland initiated a plan in the fall of 2003 to assess student utilization of services and their satisfaction with said services. This is part of what they called the "First Year Advising Program". A template was developed that had the following list of criteria:

- Goal or objective: For this college, the goal was "Students will become self-directed learners".
- Expected outcomes: Five learning outcomes were declared with the help of the advisor.
- Strategies: Advisors looked toward other services to help student reach their outcomes (tutoring, career counseling, financial aid, etc.)

- Measurement: Students would give a self-report discussing their level of ability or knowledge in the expected outcomes as a result of the First Year Advising program. This information was used to measure the effectiveness of the strategy.
- Assessment Instrument or Tool: Each of the five outcomes were measured by a series of answers that students gave based on their ability or knowledge in the outcome areas.
- Benchmark: A mean score of 3.7 was established.
- Status or feedback loop: Results of the assessment project.

The results of the survey showed that in three out of the five outcomes, the mean score was met, and those that did not fell just below. The results could then be used to look at areas that needed more attention (Haney & McClellan, 2009).

LIFEMAP is the name of Valencia Community College's developmental advising system. The LIFEMAP is a five stage conceptual model that is designed to help students connect with the resources of the college. "This has elevated the level of discussions that students have with advisors, as the conversations can focus on making meaning of the information rather than providing it at a base level" (Shugart & Romano, 2006, p. 141). Valencia Community College emphasizes relating individual student goals to the course learning goals, creating advising, and having advising have its own curriculum (Romano, 2009). At Valencia Community College individual stand alone departments have been replaced by answer centers with cross-trained staff and student service specialists who are there to provide in-depth services to each student. In the specific area of advising the emphasis is on deepening the level of assistance and creating staff positions whose job will be to work solely with the students while other positions process and verify data and information. The focus appears to be on process and not simple completion. To follow are some interesting statistics from this initiative:

- The persistence rate for First-Time-in-College Students went from 65% in 1994-95 to 79% in 2004-05.

- Average number of credit hours completed increased from 7.9 in fall 1994 to 8.9 in fall of 2005.
- The term-to-term persistence rate of new students who enroll in prep courses and take the student success course is 90% compared to 62% for students who drop their prep course and do not take the student success course.
- Valencia Community College ranks #1 among community colleges in the US in the number of associate degrees awarded, and #4 in associate degrees award to Hispanic students.

The Borough of Manhattan Community College faced the challenge of keeping their very diverse population engaged in the program and headed toward graduation. They noted that in their nursing program (where advising was more consistent and more defined) there was higher retention rates. The college was given a grant by the U.S. Department of Education to improve advising. They developed a faculty advising program where newly recruited faculty members were given a 3-day workshop at the beginning of the semester to train them to be faculty advisors. There were also follow up sessions throughout the semester. The faculty also developed discipline guides and a template that each and every advisor could use to make the process more consistent. They were also trained in “DegreeWorks” the computer software used to track advising sessions. Wiseman & Messitt (2010) went on to discuss that faculty members did feel a little slighted due to increased work load. However, they also said, “Faculty advisors explicitly commented on feeling a strong sense of community and commitment to advising” (p 44). It was also stressed that in order for faculty to engage in this process, which is imperative, there should be some sort of release time and/or compensation (Wiseman & Messitt, 2010). The statistics show that the faculty advising program at Borough of Manhattan Community College was a success. In the spring of 2008, Title V Recruits that were in the faculty advising program had a 67.7% retention rate while the other liberal arts students that were not in the program had a 51.7% rate.

Even though this was a university setting, Rutgers University, New Jersey offered a viable option to the troubles with advising as well. They called this an “instruction-oriented peer advising program to serve undergraduates who have not decided if they want to choose communication as a major, need guidance in finding a major, or simply request further assistance” (Kuo & Endick, (2011), p. 1). This college offered a course on peer advising. They also had peer advisors who held office hours, held workshops, open houses, fairs, and visited classrooms to discuss the major. With this approach some students gain vital experience in leadership, while others are able to comfortably speak with someone who has been through what they have which is often preferable, especially to timid students, or perhaps non-traditional students. Some of the positive feedback that came from this program was that the peer advisors said that the department seemed friendlier to them, that they had tapped into resources that they did not know about prior to becoming an advisor, and they felt more connected to the department and were able to form close bonds with fellow advisors and advisees. They found felt very happy in the role, they felt as if it was developing leadership and professional competency and some even said that their perception of the department had changed for the better (Kuo & Endick). This sounds like engagement at its best.

Another excellent program was established at the College of Sciences Undergraduate Advising Center (COSUAC) at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). This plan was geared toward students on probation, but a lot of the techniques that they used could also be a way to engage students and increase retention rates. The college was experiencing long lines and frustrated students at advising, there was not time for the advisors to develop a relationship with students or assess difficulties that they may encounter or even provide information on enhancements that they may benefit from. Just as evidenced by earlier reports, the students were

not going to advisors, they were not utilizing services that were available to them. The college developed a program (Strategies for Academic Success or SAS) that was designed to help students with individualized needs. Each student had to fill out a questionnaire and a contract prior to making their initial appointment with an advisor. Even though these students were on probation, the questionnaire could be used to help new students become aware of the needs that they may have, the obstacles that may be before them, and also help them objectify their situation in a rational and honest way. The first appointment the advisor and the student go over the questionnaire and work to identify needs and develop an action plan. The students are required to attend a study skills class and complete specific requirements before the next advising session. The next sessions involve looking at the 5 steps to completion which are:

1. Defining life goals
2. Understanding career goals
3. Determining program choices
4. Selecting appropriate courses
5. Determining scheduling choices

The results of initiating the program were encouraging. Prior to developing the program, approx 50% of the students on probation were dismissed at the end of the semester. After the program, the percentage fell to 40%. The student's chances of enrollment at UTSA significantly improved if they met with an advisor and completed an action plan. In 2009, 48% of the students who did not complete an action plan were dismissed, compared to 32% of those that did complete the plan (Rolf & Craven, 2010).

### **What Can Be Done?**

What all of these colleges had in common was a clear, concise plan and follow up to make sure that the plan gets carried out. It is no mystery that community college enrollment is going up and budgets are going down. The changes in economy are causing more non-traditional students to enroll and these students may be underprepared both academically and socially. It is imperative, based on research, that we reach students early on and help them to develop a plan for their future. We need to engage the students and develop a pride for the school, for their accomplishments and for education in general.

Not only do we need to get students engaged with the school and with the program, but we also need to streamline the program to where it is effective, consistent, and welcoming. Brevard Community College has wonderful professors that are held in high esteem by the students, many students want more interaction with the professors. There are also many students who want to become more involved and many students who feel as if they are not getting the advising services that they need. We have students, not only at BCC, but all over, that are not feeling welcomed at their school and who are not staying, not coming back the following semester. If we could develop a program that utilizes caring faculty and second year students that can help new students in the first few weeks of school become engaged and excited about being a BCC student, and at the same time refer them to any services that may be required and help them become aware of the student services that BCC has to offer, this will have a major impact on their overall impression of the BCC and of education in general. The peer and faculty advisors will also be a great help to the advising staff who are overworked and trying as hard as they can

to accommodate all of the needs of our students. What would Brevard Community College like to see in such a program?

- A welcoming, friendly environment for first time students
- Positive, energetic support to students to help them engage
- Early intervention in the first few days of school that includes invasive advising
- Early introduction to services such as OSD, Tutoring, Financial Aid, and Career Counseling
- A reward system that will keep them motivated to carry through to the end
- A template for easy and reliable use in every advising situation
- Positive faculty interaction to promote faculty-student bonding and faculty reputation
- Positive peer interaction to encourage student bonding and exhibit healthy role modeling and leadership skills
- Maintenance of student goals through follow-up sessions, workshops, fairs, student-led group discussions, etc.

### **The Process**

The first line of business would be to develop a task force or team of faculty/staff/administrative members to head up the development of the initiative. These individuals will develop the questionnaire to be used in the first advising session as well as the template for advisors to use. They will need to have a training session with the advisors on the

template and the questionnaire. It is vital that all advisers attend the training and that there is follow up to ensure that the template is being used and the questionnaire is being utilized properly. The team will also be involved in recruiting faculty members as advisers (possibly using the mentor program that is already in existence with some tweaks and changes). The task force will work with other faculty (and possible SGA) to recruit peer advisers. The students, the faculty, the peer advisers, and the task force team can work together to come up with the schedule of events for the first three days and the marketing techniques, etc. They will also work on follow up activities that can be done later in the semester, that are fun and educational such as “Majors night (Noll, 2011) where specific programs of study are featured so that students can learn about every major at the college in a fun and education environment. The team will also develop a reward system such as the “Certificate of Engagement” that Penn State uses (Noll, 2011) to give the students once they have completed the engagement phase. In order to get your certificate, the student must have every department sign off that the student has been to their department and assessed for needs. The last person to sign the Certificate of Completion will be the advisor. This will mean that the student has already been informed about all of the different student services areas and will be better equipped at speaking to the advisor about his/her concerns. The advisors set up either a faculty advisor or a peer advisor to work with the student. The specific needs of the student would determine which advisor would be used. Since time is a factor as is compensation, perhaps a pilot study can be conducted using only one discipline for the faculty advisor/peer advisor part of this initiative. This will give a good idea of the benefits of such a program. Depending on budget, faculty members may get a small stipend or release time while students can get service learning hours for working as advisors. Student peer-advisors could also set up a office where they can answer any questions for all students, and set up

appointment times for their appointed advisees. The peer advisors could be given service learning credit or perhaps credit towards their honors certificate.

BCC could offer an intensive three day introduction as a college student that offers a chance for students to become engaged with other students and with student services and with the school itself, we will have students who are more dedicated to graduated and more willing to use the services that are provided to them. As research shows, catch them early on and get them excited and then follow through so that the motivation does not dwindle. Each student will be walked through the process of learning about student services with the end result, an appointment with the advisor. The advisor will then create a plan of action using a newly developed template that all advisors are to use in order to streamline the advising process and create consistency. An engaged student with a strong strategic goal to graduate is what we are looking for. Engage them in the first few days, then let's create a clear, specific goal and follow up to see the student is reaching the goals that were set in the initial meeting.

### **Call to Action**

- Create task force that is comprised of at least one advising staff, faculty, staff, and student peer counselor.
- Task force develops templates and questionnaire
- Task force recruits faculty advisors and peer advisors
- Advisor, faculty advisor, peer advisor, and as many service personnel as possible, attend training sessions

- Plan three day event that catches the student right at the front door, provide catchy slogan, like “Just DO it!”, or “Your in Good Hands” or “Knowing is half the battle”
- Develop “Certificate of Engagement” and specific criteria of completion to give student at the end of the three days
- Develop follow-up workshops and activities to make sure student is maintaining the steps toward their goal. This could be done through groups and with individual counselors.

### **Summary**

It is clear by our own survey and by the research that was discussed in this paper, that student services is vital to each and every college student’s success and that there are issues and pitfalls in the current procedure. A Quality Enhance Program that focuses on engaging a student in the first few days of school, developing a clear, concise template for all advisors to use to create consistency, and a team of faculty and peer advisors that will engage the student early on and continue to work with them throughout the first semester, will certainly be a benefit to Brevard Community College.

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