

DEAL OR NO DEAL: ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATORS PROMOTE STUDENT SUCCESS

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Brief Biography for: Dr. Marcia A. Gellin

Marcia A. Gellin received her Ed.D. from the University at Buffalo in 1983, and a Master of Science degree in Nursing from Boston University in 1973. She has over 30 years of experience in Nursing Education and administration, at the baccalaureate and associate degree levels. Dr. Gellin is an author, clinical specialist in Maternal/Child Nursing, educator and administrator. Within the past two years, she has served as Interim Associate Vice-President for Allied Health at the college. Currently, Dr. Gellin is an Asst. Academic Dean for Liberal Arts at Erie Community College in Buffalo, N.Y.

Brief Biography for: Mary A. Beard

Mary A. Beard received her Master of Education degree in 1976 from the State University of New York at Buffalo. She has over 20 years of experience in education at the college level. Currently, Ms. Beard is an Assistant Academic Dean for Liberal Arts at Erie Community College in Buffalo, New York.

Introduction

Open-door policies and developmental education programs for differentially prepared (academically under-prepared, at-risk) associate degree students are typical of most community colleges, and these institutional policies and strategies help enroll and educate racially diverse at-risk students. Unfortunately, even though large numbers of these students register for classes in community colleges, the numbers who graduate are much smaller. Federally set timelines have indicated that students should complete associate degrees in three years (Benitez & DeAro, 2004).

Background/Literature Review

Community College Mission and Student Populations

Community colleges driven by missions to serve their local communities, and adapting services and programs to changing local demographics and workforce needs is key to the survival and success of two-year colleges (Benitez & DeAro, 2004). The mission of Erie Community College is to be a comprehensive provider of quality, flexible, affordable and accessible academic and training programs, along with related services, that meet the needs of a diverse student body and promotes regional economic growth (Erie Community College, 2006, p.8).

The nation's nearly 1,200 community colleges are a vital point of entry into higher education. They enroll more than 11.5 million students – including 45 percent of all U.S. undergraduate college students. Community colleges enroll 46 percent of all African Americans, 55 percent of all Hispanic, and 55 percent of all Native American students (Lamkin, 2004).

The community college population nation-wide continues to diversify, with increasing numbers of students of racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities and low socioeconomic status, more students who are the first in their families to attend college, and more who are considerably older than traditional college age (Perin, 2005). ECC, as the college is popularly known, takes pride in the diversity of its students. The student body includes: recent high school graduates, senior citizens, athletes, former homemakers, disabled students, business executives, veterans, transfer students, international students, and native Buffalonians (Erie Community College, 2006, p. 5).

Community college students often are at-risk students. More than half of them exhibit at least two of the seven characteristics that have been shown to reduce a student's chance of completing a college program: delayed enrollment after high school graduation, lack of a high school diploma, part-time enrollment, full-time work (at least 30 hours per week), financial independence from parents, dependents other than a spouse, or single parenthood. Low-income students and students of color are especially likely to exhibit these characteristics (Lamkin, 2004).

Barriers to completion of degrees at Erie Community College include: 13 percent of the student population indicated they had children, making family care issues a concern and opt to take lighter course loads, or in some cases, withdraw from school; 92 percent of all students work; 56 percent indicated they work more than 20 hours per week; 73 percent of students stated they intended to transfer to another institution. Many of these students leave prematurely for one of the 17 other WNY institutions before completing a degree; and 65 percent test at levels that require them to take developmental courses in Math and/or English. These are noncredit courses that add to the time it takes to complete a degree (Erie Community College Strategic Plan, Appendix A, 2005, p. 9).

Statement of Purpose

In order to respond to the changing demographics of community college students, nontraditional approaches to education are increasingly needed. Community college administrators are seeking new ways to improve their institutional policies and strategies, as well as their academic procedures in order to help at-risk students to succeed. The purpose of this paper is to describe the institutional policies and strategies that have been developed at the college in order to increase the structure and support for at-risk students.

Policies & Strategies

Academic Review Committee

The Academic Review Committee was established by the College-Wide Academic Standards Committee for the purpose of reviewing academic appeals for readmission. The Committee consists of two Assistant Academic Deans, one of whom chairs the committee, a counselor, a financial aide representative, an Admissions representative, and the Dean of Students.

If a student falls below a minimum quality point average (QPA) for a specific number of credit hours, the student will receive a letter of his/her probationary status or dismissal from a program. Standards for dismissal/probation include: (1) Probationary status must be removed by the end of the next regular semester or the student will be subject to the Dismissal Policy; (2) Any student with more than one-half of the courses attempted showing a "W" in two sequential semesters will be subject to the Dismissal Policy; (3) Students academically dismissed from a program of study may register in the college as a part-time non-matriculated student. The maximum number of credit hours will be less than twelve; and (4) Once students have been reinstated, they will receive a letter of this change of status (Erie Community College, 2006, p. 49).

During this period of reduced work, the student should seek advisement regarding the courses to be scheduled and counseling regarding study skills and financial aid. When the QPA has been brought up to acceptable standards, the student may re-apply for admission to matriculated status. The student may appeal the dismissal by a designated date.

The Committee will determine the status of the student to be one of the following: (1) Readmission without reservation; (2) Readmission and required registration in GS-111; (3) Readmission part-time matriculated; (4) Readmission upon successful completion of stipulated academic requirement; (5) Remain part-time, non-matriculated; and (6) No readmission. Students who were dismissed and are eventually reinstated must meet any new curricula requirements in effect at the date of their reinstatement (Erie Community College, 2006, p. 49).

Fresh Start Policy

The purpose of the Fresh Start Policy is to create a system for students to be able to return in good academic standing. ECC students who have not registered at the college in the past five years can apply for consideration for Fresh Start status. A Fresh Start student will receive credit for only previous courses with a "C" grade or better which meet degree requirements for the new program of study. A maximum of 50 percent of the required credits toward a certificate or degree may be transferred from the student's previous work at ECC in the Fresh Start Program.

Students interested in the Fresh Start Program must be recommended by an Assistant Academic Dean, a Counselor, and a Student Services representative and approved by the Associate Vice-President. If Fresh Start status is granted, the following regulations apply: (1) All grades earned at ECC will remain on the transcript; (2) For

purposes of determining academic status (good standing/probation/dismissal/graduation), cumulative average is determined beginning with the coursework completed after the minimum five-year absence; (3) The student must accept all current degree and departmental requirements at the time of acceptance into the Fresh Start Program; (4) As a result of being granted Fresh Start, a student will receive credit toward the total degree requirement for only those courses taken prior to the student's five-year absence from ECC in which the student earned a grade of "C" or better; at least 50 percent of the degree or certificate requirements must be completed in the Fresh Start status; and (5) The Fresh Start program is extended only once during the student's enrollment at ECC. Changes made to the student's record under this policy are permanent and may not be changed in the future for any reason (Erie Community College, 2006, p. 20).

Coordinated Studies Program

Coordinated Studies Programs, also known as Learning Communities, are classes that are linked during an academic term, around an interdisciplinary theme, and enroll a common cohort of students. These programs were developed by one of the Assistant Academic Deans in collaboration with the program coordinator. Input was provided from the other Assistant Academic Deans and the Associate VP for Academic Affairs, before these courses were presented to the College-Wide Curriculum Committee for approval.

Erie Community College offers Coordinated Studies Programs to first year full-time General Studies students undecided of a specific educational program and interested in exploring career options. The program provides students with opportunities to explore, experience, and assess career options within one of the college divisional academic programs: Health Services, Business/Public Service, and Technology. Students in similar programs enjoy enhanced academic and social opportunities, satisfactory GPAs, improved connections to faculty, and increased understanding of their abilities and interests in the targeted careers (Erie Community College, 2006, p. 61).

Student retention in several programs from Fall 2006 to Spring 2007 is as follows: (1) Health Services/City: 75 percent; (2) Health Services/North: 86 percent; and (3) Technology/North: 84 percent.

College Success Skills

The College Success Skills course is a 3-credit course which was developed to provide an opportunity for students to learn and adopt methods and strategies to promote personal growth and success in college and in life. The Assistant Academic Dean who chairs the Academic Review Committee and her colleagues, determine whether or not students must take GS-111 prior to/or concurrent with resuming a full-time course schedule. Topics in the course include: learning styles, problem-solving and creativity,

cultural diversity, bibliographic instruction; time/task management, methods of inquiry and critical thinking, academic policies and procedures (Erie Community College, 2006, p. 210).

Tracking Academic Performance

A case management approach is currently being used by counseling and specially assigned transitional staff, to move differentially prepared students successfully into training and degree programs (Erie Community College, 2006, p. 18). In addition, the Assistant Academic Deans have begun to randomly assess students who have been reviewed by the campus Academic Review Committee to identify trend data that will allow administrators and faculty to decide whether the information gathered draws meaningful conclusions, and is an accurate reflection of students' academic preparedness.

Summary

The initiatives of the Assistant Academic Deans at the college have had one central goal: to increase the success rates of at-risk students. These initiatives aim to help more students reach their individual goals, which may include obtaining a better job, earning a community college certificate or degree, or attaining a bachelor's degree. They seek to help the college build its' capacity to assess student outcomes, set concrete and specific measurable goals for improvement, and track student's progress toward those goals.

Projections indicate that the number of at-risk students will continue to increase, as community college administrators and faculty strive to improve success for those students needing the most help.

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