Tech Scholars Learning Community: A College-University Partnership Program for Academically And Economically Disadvantaged Students

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Abstract - This paper describes a college-university partnership program, namely the Tech Scholar Learning Community, formed by the Division of Engineering Technology at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan and the Schoolcraft College in Livonia, Michigan. The objective is to increase the number of academically and economically disadvantaged students who transfer from community colleges to baccalaureate programs. The strategies adopted to improve transfer rates are presented, and the criteria for selection of the target students and the factors affecting the transfer of the target group are discussed.

Index Terms – Community College, Learning Community, Minority Student, Transfer Student.

INTRODUCTION

Encouraging and supporting persistence and transfer among students who are academically and economically disadvantaged including minorities and women continues to be a challenge for higher education administrators, faculty and staff. To be successful in changing the dropout patterns of these students’ calls for stiff determination, creativity and constant assessment.

The Michigan College/University Partnership (MICUP) Program was created by the Michigan State Legislature in 1988 as a part of the larger King-Chavez-Parks (KCP) Initiative [1]. The legislative intent is to increase the number of academically and economically disadvantaged students who transfer from community colleges to baccalaureate programs. The intent of the MICUP Program is to provide seed money that will serve as catalyst for institutional change, stimulating more coordinated efforts within institutes, permanently ensuring both shot- and long-term measurable improvement in academically and economically disadvantaged students’ completion of baccalaureate degrees. The Michigan Department of Career Development’s KCP Initiative provides oversight to the MICUP Program and technical assistants to the institutions.

THE TARGET GROUP

The Tech Scholars Learning Community targets minority students, female students and students who are under-prepared academically and/or need financial aid. The criteria for selection of academically under-prepared students will be scores on one of three assessment tests (ASSET, Computerized Placement Test, or ACT). Students who fall below the college-level scores in writing, reading, or mathematics will be eligible. Students who are eligible for financial aid will meet the economically disadvantaged criteria.
A recent study of non-persisting students at Schoolcraft College indicates that demographic attributes have different influences on retention. African-American students were less likely to complete individual classes than their white counterparts. Older students were less likely to persist than younger ones. Minorities and poor adult women particularly those with children, as well as under-prepared and economically disadvantaged students have little support in making the transfer from the community college to the four-year institution [3]-[6]. Based on these findings, the Tech Scholars Learning Community has actively recruited minority students and female students.

Members of the targeted students are commuter students. Students that commute are less likely to persist because they do not have the same opportunities to form close bonds with peers, faculty and staff that are normal for students in residential colleges. Many students are also faced with issues related to poverty such as insufficient food, inadequate shelter or utility shutoff. They do not know what community or university resources are available to assist with such problems. The urgency of survival and security issues overwhelms the student and can easily cause them to leave school to confront the immediate crisis. Frequently, these students are first generation college attendees. As a result, they may not receive the family support that students from middle and high-income families, whose parents are college graduates, receive. They may also find the four-year institution environment intimidating. Wayne State University for example is larger than the community college, and has multiple campuses. Its’ administrative procedures and matriculation requirements may seem complex. Information is often not centralized and meeting with faculty and staff may seem impersonal. These environmental barriers within the University may prove to be overwhelming to potential transfer students. However, if they have not developed the skills required to identify the resources and form supportive relationships that would enable them to persist through the transfer process, the loss is inevitable.

**PROJECT OVERVIEW**

The analysis of student background characteristics was used as guidelines for developing the plan of operation for the Tech Scholars Learning Community. The overall strategy adopted to improve transfer rates of the target students focuses on identifying students early in the process, creating learning communities, coordinating specialized services, and adapting the Electronic Portfolio to assess student and program performance. The planned activities include:

- **Establish Advisory Board:** To address the proposed increase in collaboration between SC and WSU an Advisory Board will be established. The Advisory Board will provide a means to increase dialogue between WSU and SC faculty and staff members on the issue of student retention and transfer. Such collaboration will serve to enhance program strategies and service delivery for transfer students.

- **Create a Learning Community:** Many students need personal attention and encouragement to help them continue their education. The learning community allows students to pair up to do team project and learn from each other while at the community college and continue after transferring to WSU. This new method teaches teamwork skills in early semesters, but mostly fosters a sense of belonging, and helps students develop their education plan, provides peer mentoring and a focus on academic achievement.

- **Develop Individual Educational Plans:** The WSU Division of Engineering Technology has set up plans of study for all six majors transferring from community colleges. WSU staff will meet with SC staff and students to assist students in setting up their electronic plans of study specifically based on Schoolcraft College transfer equivalencies.

- **Provide Support for English and Math Courses:** MATH 129 Pre-calculus is the lowest mathematics course recognized for transfer by WSU. Any student that places below that course will be required to go through the developmental math sequence at Schoolcraft College. An optional math summer session will be provided jointly by WSU and Schoolcraft College to enable students to master the math courses needed to transfer. ENG101 English Composition is a required English course that transfers to WSU. Students would be required to complete that course at Schoolcraft College. Writing Fellows is a support program at Schoolcraft designed to help students one-on-one in the preparation and development of writing. Students, who are excellent writers, are selected by faculty to help other students by reviewing their written work. These peer tutors receive specialized training by the Learning Assistance Center. There are currently over 26 Writing Fellows on campus. Writing Fellows are also available on-line.

- **Provide Students with Support and Assistance to Secure Financial Aid:** Schoolcraft College received an endowment for scholarships to support academically and economically disadvantaged students from the Thompson-McCully Foundation. WSU also has Presidential Scholarships and Tech Scholars will be encouraged to apply. Often students would not visit with financial aid advisors, particularly, if they had failed to file the federal financial aid application in a timely manner. This sometimes resulted in the student having to dropout because financial resources were not available to pay for the semester.

- **Establish Peer Mentoring between WSU Students and Tech Scholars:** The Peer-Assisted Learning program at Schoolcraft places students who have successfully completed the course in the classroom to assist students with additional tutoring. This allows the tutors to follow assignments first-hand and closely monitor student...
learning. WSU (junior and senior) students from Engineering Technology will also be used as peer mentors to increase academic success and to encourage relationships between Schoolcraft Tech Scholars and WSU students.

- **WSU Orientation and Series of Personal Development/Critical Thinking Workshops:** A series of personal development workshop featuring such topics as time management, credit management, handling relationship crisis, working effectively with professors, handling change will be developed for University Bound students. Students will also be given workshop activities on the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and critical thinking.

### THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

The research continually supports learning communities as a systemic approach to improve educational outcomes [7]-[8]. The most important aspect of the learning community is that it provides an opportunity for students to build relationships with one another and with faculty while being immersed in the content. Moreover, it also calls for faculty to interact with one another more frequently and to provide quality personal attention to students.

The concept of learning community was implemented through the development of a tested curriculum, taught by knowledgeable faculty, and delivered through a seamless pathway from high school, through the community college, to the university. Table 1 shows the courses sequence for the first cohort students recruited in Fall 2002. The technical concentrations of the cohort students include Computer-Aided Drafting (CAD), Computer-Assisted Manufacturing (CAM), Computer Information Systems (CIS), Electronics (ELECT), and Metallurgy (MET). Each semester 24 more students will be added. Over the course of four semesters (or the two-year program), a total of 96 students will be served. The cohort selection will be repeated each semester through graduation at WSU.

Table 2 listed the support systems for the first cohort students. The Electronic Portfolio (EP) was developed by Schoolcraft College, through a grant with the League for Innovation and the Pew Charitable Trust, for students to use for self-assessment and faculty to use for program assessment. Students and faculty use the e-portfolio to demonstrate and assess learning outcomes. The skills are performance-based and incorporate general education as well as specific occupational competencies. Beyond the benefit of skills assessment, the students work in teams, apply new technology (web-based information), and integrate concepts across the curriculum.

Participating students will be exposed to the EP concept while enrolled in the learning community and will maintain electronic portfolios as a way to demonstrate authentic learning at Schoolcraft College. EPs will serve to assess student progress, as well as, Tech Scholars and General Education program effectiveness. In many ways, the EP is a more efficient method of assessing when compared to pencil and paper tests. Furthermore, the electronic portfolio serves as a good process to teach the participants about communicating through the use of technology.

### LESSON LEARNED

The Tech Scholars Learning Community Program was started in fall semester of 2002. Throughout the past year, the Advisory Board met several times to access what needs to be done differently to increase transfer rates of target students. What became clear was the need to link the communications and technology classes together. The groundwork for those linked classes has been completed (approval of faculty committees; publication in the schedule of class booklet, etc.).

The Advisory Board established between Schoolcraft College and Wayne State University proved to be very successful. It was comprised of faculty and staff from both institutions. This group worked actively and cohesively to assess what needed to be done differently to increase transfer rates of targeted students. This group also participated in the WSU Academic Success Summit. This strategy for collaboration was beneficial and will be continued in this “university bound” program.

Faculty and staff found that direct student engagement was tremendously successful. Examples of such engagement and activities included meeting with students in classes to discuss transfer opportunities, evaluating transcripts on the spot and having WSU faculty tutor students in math. Students formed bonds with WSU faculty and felt that the personal attention was an incentive to actively pursue the transfer option. These activities are considered “BEST PRACTICES” and will be continued.

Building a learning community takes longer than anticipated. Finding faculty and students, developing curriculum (including the curriculum committee approval process) and making the deadline for the course schedule book took nearly a year. In the interim a “simulated” learning community was developed through workshops, field trips, and counseling.

Workshop attendance appeared to assist students with academic achievement. Data gathered from the project indicated that those students who attended workshops improved their cumulative grade point average. Therefore, a series of workshop activities designed to foster critical thinking, personal growth and connect students to key people within the WSU will serve to facilitate students’ sense of belonging at Wayne State University. WSU faculty/staff and consultants will be used. These workshops will continue throughout students’ enrollment at Schoolcraft and on through graduation at WSU.
TABLE 1
PROGRAM SEQUENCE FOR FIRST COHORT STUDENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester One</th>
<th>Semester Two</th>
<th>Semester Three</th>
<th>Semester Four</th>
<th>Semester Five</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English 100</td>
<td>Political Science 105</td>
<td>English 102 or 106</td>
<td>Humanities 106</td>
<td>Math, Statistics, or Accounting Requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math 113</td>
<td>Elective</td>
<td>Psychology 153</td>
<td>Science Elective</td>
<td>CAD, CAM, CIS, ELECT or MET required courses (select 3 from major)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAD 103</td>
<td>CAD, CAM, CIS, ELECT or MET required courses (select 3 from major)</td>
<td>CAD, CAM, CIS, ELECT or MET required courses (select 3 from major)</td>
<td>Dual Enrollment Course with WSU</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to Technology 101</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2
SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR FIRST COHORT STUDENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester One</th>
<th>Semester Two</th>
<th>Semester Three</th>
<th>Semester Four</th>
<th>Semester Five</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning Community</td>
<td>Peer Assisted Learning in Political Science</td>
<td>Writing Fellows in English 102 or 106</td>
<td>Peer Assisted Learning in Science Elective</td>
<td>Peer Assisted Learning in Math, Statistics or Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Fellows in English 100 or 101</td>
<td>Electronic Portfolio in Course from Major</td>
<td>Peer Assisted Learning in Psych 153</td>
<td>Electronic Portfolio in Course from Major</td>
<td>Electronic Portfolio in Course from Major (Business 217)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Assisted Learners in Math 113</td>
<td>Field Trip to WSU</td>
<td>Field Trip to WSU</td>
<td>Dual Enrollment with WSU</td>
<td>Dual Enrollment with WSU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Counseling in Intro to Tech</td>
<td>IEP Counseling</td>
<td>Electronic Portfolio in Course from Major</td>
<td>IEP Counseling</td>
<td>IEP Counseling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Portfolio integrated in Intro to Tech</td>
<td></td>
<td>IEP Counseling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Education Plan (IEP)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preparation for Spring/Summer Internships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Creating an environment that encouraged and supported student decision-making, motivation and validation, improved the development of self-esteem and the sense of affiliation with peers, faculty and staff. Students were given several opportunities to participate in decisions about workshop activities that were offered. Inclusion in decision-making often increased the students’ motivation to participate. As a result of these efforts, students reported they felt validated by program staff using their ideas. Such recognition supported their sense of belonging and self-actualization. It is the intent of the program faculty and staff at both Schoolcraft College and Wayne State University to continue to solicit student advice on the workshops and the learning community.

Encouraging and supporting students to seek advice from financial aid and academic advisors helped students to continue in school without stopping out and to meet WSU academic requirements for graduation. Often students would not visit with financial aid advisors, particularly, if they had failed to file the federal financial aid application in a timely manner. This sometimes resulted in the student having to dropout because financial resources were not available to pay for the semester. Encouraging meetings with academic advisors kept students aware of the specific classes and sequences that they were required to complete in order to progress each semester toward graduation.

CONCLUSION

The Tech Scholars Learning Community aims to increase the number of academically and economically disadvantaged students who transfer from Schoolcraft Colleges to engineering and engineering technology programs at Wayne State University. The description of target students and the strategies adopted to improve transfer rates are presented. Lessons learned from the first year project was discussed. Continued work needs to be done to support an environment
of diversity and enhanced critical thinking, particularly about the issues of student persistence, retention, and transfer.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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**REFERENCES**


[2] “Analysis of Student Enrollment and Patterns of Educational Goal Completion at Schoolcraft College, 2002,”


