



Early Childhood Education Model of Success

Gulf Coast State College

Panama City, FL

http://www.gulfcoast.edu/socsci/early_childhood_ed/default.htm

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Enhanced Student Services to Support Program Completion

Community and state colleges in the state of Florida have launched a statewide campaign to address degree completion. This effort represents a fundamental change in focus for institutions of higher education. For the past four decades, providing access has been the central focus for higher education policy. While these access policies have produced increases in student enrollment, these successes have not necessarily translated into parallel increases in degree completion.

It is clear that failing to complete a degree has dramatic financial implications for individual students. Furthermore, many community college students face additional challenges in relation to degree completion. Research indicates that college students are less likely to complete a degree if they are academically unprepared, attend classes on an intermittent or part-time basis, work more than 20 hours per week, fall behind in credits during the first year, are a first-generation student, and/or are minority or low-income students.¹ These student characteristics account for two-thirds of the variation in graduation rates among students. There is evidence, however, that institutions serving this at-risk population can overcome these obstacles.²

The student population enrolled in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs at Gulf Coast State College mirrors the at-risk profile identified above. Typically, ECE students work full-time in low-income jobs and attend college courses on an irregular, part-time schedule. In addition, many of the early childhood students must take developmental coursework in math, reading, and English. With these factors in mind, the administration and staff of the ECE programs at Gulf Coast State College established a priority that focuses on degree completion by increasing opportunities for student persistence and

success. Moving into action, degree completion has become a primary objective for our Early Childhood Education Department. The ECE team identified degree completion strategies in two areas: 1) methods to remove barriers for students working full-time; and 2) strategies to support progression toward degree completion.

Beginning in the 2010-11 academic year, the ECE staff began efforts to design a pathway to graduation for working adults. Strategies were developed in collaboration with adjunct faculty and local early childhood education agencies/providers to address specific factors faced by students working full-time. At the beginning of the academic year, an advising panel consisting of ECE students, ECE instructors, local ECE providers, and college personnel was convened to identify barriers to completion and possible resources/solutions. Information gathered from this panel was used to identify implementation strategies. At the beginning of the term, enhanced advising procedures were developed to target this at-risk, working population. ECE advisors worked with local providers to identify potential “working” students and to provide one-on-one advising located onsite at the student’s place of employment. This strategy proved valuable for students who could not leave work or travel to the college campus to meet with ECE advisors. ECE advisors were able to provide students with key program information, address questions or concerns, establish personal relationships with students, and enroll students in appropriate coursework. In addition to these enhanced onsite advising sessions, additional sections of classes were added to the fall schedule that were offered onsite at the employment facility. Once again, this strategy assisted students from rural/remote locations who found it difficult to travel to the college main campus to attend classes. Collaboration among program staff, key adjunct faculty, and early childhood providers was vital to the success of this strategy.

Expanded advising procedures and services will also be the focus for the 2011-12 academic year. While the emphasis on meeting the needs of working students will remain, additional advising services will target ECE students who are close to program completion. Through student database records and degree audit reports, program staff will identify students who are within 10 hours and 20 hours of program completion. This program research will provide ECE staff with detailed information about student progression toward completion of program requirements. Once students are identified at the 10 and 20 hour benchmarks, advisors will be assigned to communicate and work directly with each potential completer. This targeted, individual advising will strengthen relationships and establish close communication with students as they approach program completion. Once again, program staff will work closely to involve adjunct faculty and local ECE providers to establish an integrated support system for students designed to mitigate potential risk factors.

How the Model is Innovative and/or Unique

The most unique components of this model include the innovations to assist working students. Since many of our students live and work in rural or remote areas, the workplace advising and course offerings proved to be extremely helpful. These strategies removed ongoing barriers for students who have challenges related to transportation or travel time from home to campus.

Indications of Success

Workplace advising resulted in 45 students enrolling in courses. Of these 18 were new to the program while 27 were continuing students. The courses offered onsite at early childhood education workplaces enrolled 11 students.

EPI program staff will document success of the targeted completion model this year by examining the following factors:

- Increased collaboration and shared responsibility
- Identification of students close to graduation
- Enhanced advising/communication with target population
- Increased contact and communication between ECE advisors and program students
- Completion of required developmental coursework at the beginning of the program of study to increase successful student completion of required program coursework

How the Model is Replicable

The workplace advising and course offerings arose from a panel study involving an advisory board. This board consisted of early childhood education center directors, present students in the early childhood education program, graduates of the early childhood education program, and key college personnel. The college personnel were instructors and coordinators of the early childhood program, developmental course instructors, enrollment services personnel, and a retention officer. Such a panel is easily replicable on other college campus and can highlight barriers to completion for early childhood education students, which may be unique to a particular campus. Only by identifying such barriers can they be eradicated through strategic actions.

The model to improve completion and graduation rates is also replicable, as other colleges can utilize the steps outlined in the "Indications of Success" section to guide their own efforts. The early childhood education student population at Gulf Coast State College is a fragile one, due to the many at-risk characteristics of the students. Offering these students greater access to courses and providing individualized and targeted advising is already proving successful. The costs of this model of success are modest and primarily encompass reallocating the time and priorities of college personnel. Such a model is easily adapted to other venues.

References:

1. Astin, A. and Oseguera, L. *Degree Attainment Rates at American Colleges and Universities (Revised Edition)*, Higher Education Research Institution, University of California Los Angeles, 2005.
2. Carey, K. *One Step from the Finish Line: Higher College Graduation Rates are within Our Reach*, Education Trust, January 2005.