Helping **Underprepared** Students Succeed

By Rita Rice Morris

The national conversation about graduation rates has renewed campus-based focus upon helping students succeed in reaching their goals—with the ultimate goal of graduating.

Achieving this goal is a particular challenge for students who enter college underprepared academically or socially. By developing systems that provide our students and their families with the support and individualized attention they need, we can help them overcome the barriers that may keep them from succeeding in college.

At Shawnee State University, an open access university primarily serving the Appalachian regions of Ohio and Kentucky, we have found the following to be useful guides in improving student success.

1. **Accept responsibility.** Students come to us underprepared for a number of reasons, none of which necessarily have anything to do with our institutions. That doesn't matter. We have accepted them into the university and we all need to accept the challenge of doing everything in our power to give them the tools and opportunity to succeed.

2. **Define and measure success.** The definition of student success can vary vastly depending on whose viewpoint you chose to use. Students, parents, legislators, faculty and administrators often view success differently. As you develop programming, make certain all use the same definition of success, understand how it will be measured, and expect to utilize the outcomes of that measurement.

3. **Invest in good data to REALLY know your students.** We all think we know our students, but we have found that we are often surprised once we dissect the data. Spend the time and resources to learn more about your students beyond the typical demographics. Learn why your students succeed and why they fail. Our understanding of success and failure has been greatly influenced by examining "at risk factor" data beyond academic preparedness.

4. **Use the data.** Develop mechanisms for collecting data that will help you understand your students better and also to make strategic decisions—and then analyze that data to

bring it into context and fully understand what it means and how to use it to make improvements.

5. **Invest in the right team.** Hire faculty and staff who understand who your students are and who relate to them and embody your mission. Ensure their commitment to student success and keep them well informed about how they are doing.

6. **Focus your efforts.** It's tempting to try to take on the world, but much more reasonable to narrow your scope on a particular student population in a targeted way. Focusing on the first year experience of students with low ACT scores in English, for example, will show greater and more meaningful results.

7. **Connect with your students.** Develop programs that help your students build connections inside and outside of the classroom. These need to be tailored to the different types of students you are serving.

8. **Approach from an institution-wide standpoint.** Having a program only in academics or only through your university college isn't enough. Everything from the admission process through billing, student affairs, advising, etc. needs to be viewed through the eyes of these students.

9. **Work with your source high schools.** Share data and work with your primary high schools to develop joint strategies to improve the college readiness of your entering freshmen.

10. **Be patient.** This takes time. Begin small and lay a foundation that can be built upon.

As we know, each student is different, as is each institution. A specific program may work for one university but not another. That's why data collection and analysis is so important, as is the approach to your efforts. With the right university-wide commitment and focus, however, student success can be improved. **P**

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