MEMO

To: Dr. Vicki Riley, Larry Tackett

From: Christina Sullivan

Subject: Pilot Learning Communities Using College Success and Transitional Education courses

Date: February 20, 2012

**OVERVIEW**

Learning communities have often proven to be successful tools in promoting student success and retention. Furthermore, first-year-experience courses, particularly when taught by students’ advisors, have been promoted by experts in retention, such as George Kuh and NACADA, as an effective way to enhance retention efforts and to solidify the student-advisor relationship. Advising is expounded by many as the number one program in promoting success and retention. Thus, research suggests that a learning community combined with one’s academic advisor teaching a college success (FYE) course would likely advance WVNCC’s efforts in student retention and success.

Previously, Northern has offered learning communities with developmental courses, but this has not been done in conjunction with a student’s advisor teaching one of the courses. Because the Academic Advisor “Student Success” will be charged with teaching an orientation (FYE) course for students that person advises, this provides a unique opportunity to pilot a program which combines proven methods in engaging, retaining, and reinforcing success in a key group of our students. The Academic Advisor “Student Success” will serve as the advisor to students needing all five of Northern’s transitional courses, so combining an orientation course taught by this person with a transitional course/courses directly serves the goals of our Title III grant.

**PROPOSAL**

To test whether this method is successful in garnering success and retention, I propose that we pilot learning communities on each campus that include an FYE course, ENG 90, and/or READ 95. Students in this course will be coded and tracked to monitor the following:

* Course success rates for each class in the learning community
* Success rates for next class (ENG 101, or other appropriate)
* Retention rates in the courses in the learning communities
* Persistence rates of students from one semester to the next
* Cost implications
* Focus group data to understand student experiences with this learning community

Because the Academic Advisor “Student Success” will be in position in Spring 2012, I propose that we pilot this program in Fall 2012:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Campus** | **No. of Sections** | **FYE Course** | **Transitional Course(s) involved** | **Approx. No. of Students Served** |
| New Martinsville | 1 section | College Success | ENG 90 & READ 95 | 20 |
| Weirton | 1 section | College Success | ENG 90 & READ 95 | 20 |
| Wheeling | 3 sections | College Success | ENG 90 & READ 95 | 60 |

Courses for spring 2013 may involve only one section in Wheeling and one IPV course to cover Weirton and New Martinsville together, depending on the needs of our student population.

I would propose the instructors for these courses work somewhat collaboratively so that students can make connections between courses, particularly with the lessons taught in College Success as applied to learning content in ENG 90 and READ 95.

**CONCLUSION**

For the institution to see a “big impact” on retention and success, highly intrusive and engaging methods like the one suggested herein should be considered and tested. By taking a FYE course with their advisor, students taking the learning community option will develop a strong connection with their advisor and the importance of advising starting in the first semester. Because many students at a community college with an advising model like ours may not take a course with their advisors well into their programs (or not at all), we sometimes see a lack of appreciation for and understanding of the benefits of quality academic advising since students develop distant or no connection to their advisors. This pilot could allow us to measure the hypothesized increased intensity of the advisor-advisee relationship and the correlation that may exist in promoting student retention, which could have important implications for college-wide advising and student success/retention programming.

The College Success course will also teach students the soft skills they are often missing when first entering college. Students needing all transitional courses tend to struggle with study skills, time management, note-taking, active listening, critical thinking, and the like. This FYE course can teach students these skills, which will benefit them in their developmental coursework as well as in college-level classes.