

The Student Success Initiative: Get Ready, Get Set, Achieve and Succeed

Overview of the Initiative

Over the last decade, “student success” has become both a buzzword and a top priority for most American colleges and universities. While the term is often used as a comprehensive means of addressing student retention, persistence, graduation, and achievement of learning outcomes, every institution has its own definition of “student success” and a unique set of strategies to help students realize their potential. Southern State is no exception to this rule. For the purpose of demonstrating the college’s desire to improve as an institution and better serve current and future students, Southern State has adopted a Student Success Initiative (SSI) that articulates our goals and outlines our strategies.

Building on ideas and projects that are in early development yet poised for acceleration, Southern State is adopting a multi-component strategy to accomplish three overarching goals:

1. Increase student retention by 10%
2. Increase the graduation rate by 10%
3. Increase the transfer rate by 10%

To realize these increases, the SSI will focus on pre-entry and post-entry practices for student success guided by new and existing strategies. This initiative will be instituted and evaluated over the next two academic years (2013-14 and 2014-15) and serve as the college’s Quality Initiative for the HLC.

Core Components

The SSI is designed to determine each student’s individual needs at the point of entry, place each student on the track that best suits his or her needs, and create a customized completion plan for every student. In doing so, the college will attempt to build a seamless support system capable of guiding students through their educational experience and assuring them every opportunity to achieve success. To effectively accomplish its goals, the SSI will introduce four new components to the college’s academic platform (two pre-entry components and two post-entry components).

Pre-entry Components:

1. The college will develop and institute mandatory orientation for all first-year students, including freshmen, transfer students, and returning adults.

2. The college will develop and institute refresher courses for students who test into developmental courses. Once students complete these courses in math and/or English they will be allowed to retake the placement test.

Post-entry Components:

1. The college will require immediate enrollment in remedial education courses upon completing the placement process. This process includes the opportunity to participate in the refresher courses and retake the placement test. Once a student completes the developmental education courses they will immediately enroll in gateway courses.
2. The college will require all degree seeking, first-time college students to develop a program completion plan and keep the plan up to date

Last but not least, Southern State has designated a Student Success Center, appointed a Director of Student Success, and created a position for an administrative assistant. Student Success Center employees and volunteers will play a vital role in promoting institution-wide awareness, assessment, and improvement of the SSI, and they will coordinate and cooperate with an array of college and community stakeholders to assure the initiative's success.

Rationale

When compared to other community colleges in the area, Southern State already has a respectable graduation and transfer rate (45%), and yet the college realizes that this is an unacceptable percentage in today's competitive and outcome driven environment. Furthermore, the college recognizes that better results are not only possible, but also necessary to produce outcomes that effectively improve the economic and social well-being of our communities, our state, and our nation. Accomplishing the aforementioned goals will require a well-articulated plan of implementation, clear expectations and accountability, and support across the institution. Fortunately, Southern State is well-positioned to embark on this initiative and eager to take necessary risks, aim high, and continuously improve systems for student achievement and success.

Sufficiency of the Initiative's Scope and Significance

Relevance and Significance

Assisting students in achieving their desired outcomes has been a hallmark of Southern State since its inception in 1975, and rightly so. Degree completion and student success have long been priorities for the communities we serve, as well as the funding and accrediting bodies we answer to. That said, the call for accountability is increasing dramatically as state and federal funding gets tighter and consumers grow more skeptical of the return on their educational investments. This heightened sense of accountability challenges Southern State to aim higher by building on the existing framework, accomplishing stated strategic goals, positioning the college for successful integration into Ohio's new education funding model, and fulfilling the Ohio Board of Regents' expectation that every college will articulate and adopt a student completion plan, as part of the *Complete College Ohio* recommendations.

Southern State's strategic vision is to be "Your First-Choice College." Working toward this end, the Board of Trustees has approved six bold steps that advance this vision, and the first bold step is to create systems capable of improving student success and degree completion. As stated in the strategic planning documents, "It is not enough to simply get students in the door... the college must demonstrate a service mentality across the campus and strive to anticipate the diverse needs represented by every student population." A holistic approach to retention such as the one proposed in this Quality Initiative embraces this assertion. By recognizing and addressing complex challenges, the SSI will prepare students to fulfill their academic aspirations.

Ohio's top education decision makers and legislative leaders are shifting their emphasis away from mere numbers (enrollment) and prioritizing outcomes (student success). In the current biennium, the State of Ohio implemented a success point funding model for all 23 community colleges. The first phase of this model calls for 10 percent of the state share of instruction to be based on student success factors, including hours completed, developmental and subsequent credit bearing courses completed, and graduation rates. During the first year of the next biennium, the funding will consist of a 50/50 percent split between success points and enrollment. In the second year, a new model will be adopted and is anticipated to be completely grounded in completion, retention, and graduation rates. As such, the Quality Initiative defined in this proposal is likely to enhance Southern State's financial sustainability in the near and distant future.

The proposed initiative is relevant and significant toward fulfilling policy emerging from the Ohio Board of Regents related to greater accountability for student outcomes. The *Complete College Ohio* report, developed by a Chancellor appointed task force, includes policy recommendations designed to increase the percentage of Ohioans with degrees. Acknowledging that student success initiatives are unique to every institution, this policy offers multiple recommendations yet is grounded in a core recommendation that every college adopt its own College Completion Plan. Accepting this task, Southern State expects that the Quality Initiative and the College Completion Plan will be complimentary in nature.

Academic and Institutional Impact

Changing the culture of a higher education institution is a difficult and long term process. Community colleges, like other higher education sectors, have long been focused on increasing enrollments with less emphasis on completion due to funding models. As the funding models move toward outcomes based criteria, the culture of higher education institutions will have to change accordingly.

Southern State is facing this challenge of shifting the primary focus from increasing enrollment to improving completion, retention, transfer, and graduation rates. The goals of the SSI are the initial steps to change the college's culture and to change the paradigm from primarily access to success. While Southern State has always prided itself on providing great support for students, many efforts were limited to one campus, one department, or one class. Through the global implementation of this initiative there will be greater impact for all entering students.

Through the initiative students should enter the classroom better prepared for their educational success. Mandatory orientations and program completion plans will supply students with the knowledge they need to navigate the higher education universe. Academically, students will have the opportunity to be appropriately placed into developmental or college level courses, effectively limiting time to degree, decreasing the frustration experienced by taking courses on the wrong level, and saving precious financial aid. Additionally, by requiring students to enroll in a college level course immediately following the completion of a prerequisite developmental course, students will retain necessary information which should allow them to perform better.

Clarity of the Initiative's Purpose

Purpose and Goals

The overarching goals of this initiative include increasing student retention, graduation rates, and transfer success. Specifically, the college is targeting a 10 percent increase across all three areas over the two-year period of the initiative. The benchmark will be based on the previous two-year cohort.

On a more general level, the SSI is designed for students. The purpose is to provide students the necessary supports at the point of entry and throughout the process so that they may be successful in their goal achievement. By using pre-entry and post-entry components, the Quality Initiative will create a two-pronged approach that provides students with a seamless support system throughout their college careers. At the same time, the initiative will provide the most "at-risk" students with clear pathways through developmental coursework.

Equipping students with information about navigating the track ahead through mandatory orientation is expected to empower students to be more confident and informed. Research has shown that making orientation mandatory has increased the retention rates, and Southern State hopes to see similar results on its campuses. Furthermore, working with students to prepare a degree completion plan not only accelerates their time to completion, but also provides the opportunity for touch-points with students that might otherwise not be available.

Research has also shown that students who take more than one developmental course are less likely to persist to graduation. Implementing specific pre-entry tracks for students placing at the developmental level and offering them the opportunity to retest and earn placement in a credit bearing course is expected to improve completion rates. Additionally, by moving toward a mandatory advising environment, it is expected that students will progress into credit bearing courses with greater success.

Evaluation, Adjustments, and Accomplishments

Assessment of this Quality Initiative will mirror existing systems established for student learning and institutional effectiveness. The identified outcomes are a 10 percent increase over two years in student retention, graduation, and transfer. The measurement mechanisms will include data tracking summarized in the following categories:

- Baseline Data

- Course Completion Tracking
- Completion in Gateway Courses
- Persistence Fall to Spring
- Persistence Fall to Fall

In addition, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) will be a useful assessment instrument to measure some of the non-academic aspects of the initiative. Southern State is experienced with the CCSSE instrument and will be capable of drawing conclusions from shifts in past data.

Recent improvements and upgrades to the administrative computing system within the college will afford personnel enhanced data tracking mechanisms and reporting opportunities. In short, the monitoring process is anticipated to be more accessible to a wider population further strengthening the assessment aspect of the initiative.

Monitoring of the initiative will be rooted in a firmly established, cross-departmental committee referred to as the Institutional Collaboration Committee (ICC). In addition, administrative dashboards will be incorporated to the president's cabinet meetings and reported to the Board of Trustees as appropriate.

Challenges for Implementation

Whether aiming to complete a degree and enter the workforce or attain specific courses required for transfer, the College recognizes that adopted systems and practices play a pivotal role in a student's accomplishment of these goals. The Student Success Initiative targets students' needs at their point of entry, develops customized completion plans, and provides ongoing support throughout the experience. It seems natural to assume that these measures will lead to increased retention, graduation, and transfer success. Conversely, it is also natural to assume that initiatives such as the one proposed will require a stretch for the institution.

Academically, the college expects to face challenges in staffing and scheduling. Aspects of the plan include targeted pre-entry programming which is heavily dependent on staffing. As a rural institution situated among a community with some of the lowest educational attainment rates in Ohio, the college will have to be resourceful and creative to provide qualified staffing levels. Further, this element will require coordination and collaboration between faculty in the math and English area with the student services division of the institution.

Institutionally, the success of the SSI will rest on awareness and support throughout the college. Internal stakeholders must recognize the magnitude and significance of this effort. In some respects, student success will need to be redefined and reemphasized as some may hold dear to old models grounded in enrollment. Being mindful of messaging, including consistency and frequency, will be essential to the success of the initiative.

Evidence of Commitment to and Capacity for Accomplishing the Initiative

Support for Initiative

Beyond the logical compliance motivation, the internal college community, at every level, has embraced the goal of increasing student retention, graduation, and transfer rates. At the institution's highest administrative level, the Board of Trustees, the initiative has full support. Following their own participation in a national student success workshop, the Board members returned to campus and immediately commissioned coordination among various divisions within the college, particularly student services and academics, to prioritize student success as an institutional priority. This resulted in student success being included in the strategic plan and has already yielded several policies related to student success. Major components of this Quality Initiative emerged from the Board's prompting and subsequent institutional collaboration.

Externally, the SSI is further motivated by policy from the Ohio Board of Regents (OBR). In the recent release of *Complete College Ohio*, an OBR recommendation document, colleges were charged with developing a completion plan for their institution. This plan, along with the quality initiative, and aforementioned funding formula changes, certainly support the adoption of this student success initiative.

Individuals Involved in Implementation

The individuals involved in the implementation of the Quality Initiative are a diverse representation of multiple divisions and areas of the college. The table below outlines the various departments and individuals involved in some facet of the Quality Initiative. In addition to those listed, the Board of Trustees and the President are supportive of this work and will provide support when and where needed.

Quality Initiative component	Division(s) involved	Personnel
Mandatory orientations	Student Services and Enrollment Management	Vice President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, Director of Recruiting, Advising Office, Financial Aid, Registrar, Americorps coaches, Director of Admissions
	Academic Affairs	Campus Directors
	Division(s) involved	Personnel
Refresher courses	Academic Affairs	Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dean of Core Studies, Division Coordinators and full time faculty for English and Math, Adjunct Faculty
	Student Services and Enrollment Management	Director of Admissions, Registrar, Vice President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, Advising Office
	Human Resources	HR Director, HR Generalist, HR Assistant
	Business Office	Vice President of Business and Finance, Payroll
Developmental education enrollment	Academic Affairs	Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dean of Core Studies, Dean of Instructional Operations, Division Coordinators and full time faculty for English and Math, Adjunct Faculty
	Student Services and Enrollment Management	Registrar, Vice President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, Advising Office, Director of Admissions
Program Completion Plan	Academic Affairs	Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dean of Core Studies, Dean of Instructional Operations, Dean of Technical Studies, Division Coordinators and full time faculty for all programs and departments
	Student Services and Enrollment Management	Vice President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, Advising Office, Americorps coaches
Other components	Divisions Involved	Personnel
Assessment and evaluation	Academic Affairs	Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dean of Core Studies, Dean of Instructional Operations, Dean of Technical Studies, Division Coordinators, Vice Presidents Council, Assessment Lead
	Student Affairs	Vice President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, Director of Recruiting, Advising Office, Financial Aid, Registrar, Americorps coaches, Director of Admissions
Accountability	Executive	Board of Trustees President
Communication/ Outreach	Communication	Vice President of Institutional Advancement, Marketing Director, Webmaster, Public Relations Director

Resources Committed to Initiative

The college is currently analyzing how human resources will be allocated for the implementation of the pre-and post-entry components of the quality initiative, as well as its commitment to the continuation of current first-year success among incoming, transfer, and returning adults. This commitment will consist of a coordinated effort by the college's administration, faculty, and, in particular, the student service division of the institution.

The institution thus far has a preliminary calculation of the financial resources committed to the quality initiative. Existing staff and faculty will conduct the tri-annual mandatory orientations of the first component of the quality initiative. The financial cost of these mandatory orientations is still being determined based on the cost of the current voluntary orientation process. The overall cost of the mandatory orientations will increase due to the additional human resources needed to implement this component. The costs of developing and implementing math and English refresher classes, with the option of re-testing, reside mostly with testing and labor costs. The refresher courses will utilize ACCUPLACER testing for every incoming student, with the exception of qualified students who are transferring or have taken the ACT or SAT. For the math and English refreshers, an average of 4 hours of face-to-face instruction per adjunct faculty member is projected. Anticipating the labor costs for the projected number of needed adjunct faculty for both fall and spring semester, and aside from the initial costs of implementation of this initial component, the projected cost for the institution is \$15,000 annually for the continuation of these refresher courses. While the cost for this commitment can be considerable, it reflects the institution's directive to provide the support needed of all students' first year success.

In addition to the existing methods of data collection the institution utilizes, the college is undergoing a conversion to a new ERP/SIS system, "Jenzabar." The implementation of this updated student information system should allow for better tracking of student progress and provide for greater data based decision making. The cost of this upgrade to the institution is considerable, but in order to become a more efficient institution it is a necessary expense.

Activities and Timeline

As noted in the Overview, the SSI consists of two pre-entry components and two post-entry components. The pre-entry components are: 1) Mandatory orientation for all first-year students, including freshmen, transfer students, and returning adults; and 2) refresher courses for students who test into developmental courses; these will be refresher courses in math and English and allow students to retake the placement test after completing one or both courses. Both pre-entry components will occur three times a year (just before each semester) to assure access to all entering students.

The post-entry components are: 1) Requiring students to immediately enroll in remedial education courses upon placement, and immediately enroll in gateway courses as soon as remedial courses are completed; 2) requiring all degree seeking, first-time college students to develop a program completion plan and keep the plan up to date.

The timeline for implementation of the mandatory orientations is summer of 2013 for all first-time fall semester students. This will be followed by implementation of the refresher courses for students testing into developmental education courses beginning in December of 2013 for new spring semester 2014 students. Staggering implementation will allow for review of each component and improvement prior to beginning the next process. Additionally, by beginning the refresher courses prior to spring semester, there should be fewer students to service, allowing for an easier implementation and troubleshooting.

The implementation of post-entry components will begin with the student program completion plan in the fall semester of 2013. This will require all students to meet with an advisor and receive program completion plan either prior to or during their first semester. The requirement to be enrolled in the developmental courses upon placement, followed by immediate enrollment in gateway or college level courses, will be implemented prior to spring semester 2014. This will coincide with the implementation of refresher courses and provide students that participate with the opportunity to take refresher courses, retake the placement test, and move directly into college level coursework.

All components will be fully implemented by fall semester of 2014. These new policies and processes will be evaluated as described previously in this document to determine impact and potential changes to each component to achieve better results.

