

# **Best Practices in Student Services**

**Prepared for the Northern Labour Market  
Information Clearinghouse**

**February, 1999**



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# **Best Practices in Student Services**

## **Introduction**

The services available to college students apart from classroom instruction can have a significant impact on the success of those students throughout their college careers. Those services can take any number of forms, including: academic, financial or personal counselling services, residences and housing offices, child care, peer tutoring and counselling, Native student centres, health services, sport and recreation facilities, and more. This report looks at information from several different sources to try to pinpoint those student services which seem to be most effective in helping students to complete their programs.

Overall, this study suggests that the most effective student services are those that help students to feel personally connected to their institutions and those that help students plot the best path to their goals.

## **Methods**

This study uses information from three main sources. The first is a literature search conducted for the Clearinghouse by On-Line & Personal Inc. of Edmonton. They were asked to look for recent papers on the subject of student support services and student success.

The second source is a short survey of a selection of college personnel (in students services and/or registrars' offices) in central and eastern Canada, asking about the services that they provide and the impact of these on their students' success. Surveys were faxed or e-mailed out in early December, with a quick turnaround requested. After a series of call-backs, a total of seven completed surveys were returned from the 18 surveys sent out. The Clearinghouse Advisory Committee recommended surveying central and eastern colleges in order to avoid possible complications with competing institutions.

This survey asked for data describing the colleges and their student bodies. It also asked about the services offered to students and, most importantly, which of those services are most used and which have the greatest impact on student success (see appendix for survey tool). This part of the survey is subjective. The responses are based on the respondents' knowledge and opinions rather than on hard data.

The third source of information is work being done by the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS). This group is preparing a more detailed study of members' initiatives designed to aid student retention. The Clearinghouse received a selection of

responses to a request to CACUSS members for examples of student support and retention initiatives. Follow-up contacts gleaned further details about these sample initiatives.

The results of the CACUSS research are to be published in a CACUSS newsletter, likely in the Fall of 1999. For more information on CACUSS, and on their study, please contact Dr. Donna Hardy at Memorial University of Newfoundland at (709) 737-7594.

### **Points from Literature Search**

The literature search came up with several articles dating back to 1995, looking at various aspects of student services, at American colleges and universities. While specific situations will differ in Canada, many of the factors of student success are shared across the border. Several studies looked at the success of student support services in different colleges and universities. Many of the studies share common themes and findings:

- student life outside of the classroom has a significant impact on students' academic success
- contact with support services is most effective when made in a student's first semester
- peer tutoring and counselling programs appear to be successful
- it is important for students to feel that they have a connection to the institution that they attend.
- caring, concerned faculty make a big difference.
- the value of student support must be recognized throughout institutions. Services should be integrated with academic programs, with faculty involved and fully aware of the services available.

One of the papers found in the literature search looked specifically at Native American students at a college in Montana (Dodd, *et al.*, 1995). This study found that, for aboriginal students:

- native Student Societies help students get connected to each other and their institution
- family is the most popular support mechanism
- concerned faculty are very important.
- racism is an issue both in class and on campus generally
- the major obstacles to success are non-academic, therefore non-academic supports should be emphasized in order to help these students succeed.

A study of "best practices" that looks at five institutions selected from a larger study sample points to six factors common to all of the most successful programs:

- a project-designed freshman-year experience for most or all participants,
- an emphasis on academic support for developmental and popular freshman courses,
- extensive student service contacts,
- targeted participant recruitment and participation incentives,
- dedicated staff and directors with strong institutional attachments, and
- an important role on campus (Muraskin, 1997).

Another study, looking at students' out-of-class experience comes to the conclusion that: "...the most powerful source of influence on student learning appears to be the students' interpersonal interactions, whether with peers or faculty (and, one suspects, with staff members)." (Terenzini, *et al*, 1996). The same study also finds that student development is a cumulative result of all aspects of college life. The implications of this finding all centre on coordination of efforts and of policies within institutions to foster learning in many ways.

## **Survey Results**

This section looks at the responding colleges and what their personnel had to say about their student services. In spite of the small number (seven) of responses, some statements can be made based on the level of consensus among the respondents.

### *College Descriptions*

- The colleges that replied to our survey range in size from about 900 students to some 60,000, including both full- and part-time students. In terms of full-time enrollment, the range is from just over 800 to 10,000 students.
- Over the past five years, two of the colleges have seen growth in full-time numbers and three have had part-time numbers increase. Two have seen slight decreases in full-time numbers.
- When asked about changes seen in the make-up of their student bodies over the past five years, four respondents reported that the average age had increased; three reported that the percentage of visible minorities had increased; two mentioned a growing percentage of female students and one mentioned a growing number of single parents.
- The percentage of aboriginal and visible minority students ranged from about three per cent to "10-15%". Most respondents, including those with the highest percentage of aboriginal and visible minority students, do not provide any services specifically for them. Two colleges report having a native counsellor and a native student centre or lounge. One of these two reports that the number of aboriginal students, while still small, has increased 70% since 1996.
- Generally, distance delivery serves five per cent or less of the student populations. This is a new market area for most of the colleges.
- Student program completion rates among respondents range from "50-60%" to 83%. The mean rate is 67%, with only one college reporting over 75%. These figures have not changed over the past five years for six out of seven respondents.

### *Services Offered*

- All of the responding colleges offer academic counselling, career counselling and high school liaison services.

- Six of seven colleges offer off-campus housing services, personal counselling, services for disabled students and international student assistance.
- Five of the seven respondents offer financial aid, financial counselling and peer support programs.
- In every case, students had input into student services through representation on college committees and governing bodies.

### *Use of Services*

The survey asked which of the student services offered by each school were used by the largest number of students. The top three services, according to respondents are:

- counselling
- financial aid
- peer tutoring.

Within the broad category of “counselling”, responses were split almost evenly between career, financial, academic and personal counselling.

### *Effective Services*

The survey also asked respondents to list which services they saw as having the greatest impact on student success and retention. It must be recognized that this survey in general, and this question in particular, is based on respondents’ personal knowledge and impressions.

Respondents were not asked to provide quantitative data regarding the effectiveness of services.

- Counselling was the most popular choice, cited by three respondents.
- Other services listed include: financial aid, health services, career services and peer tutoring.

### **Examples from CACUSS Data**

Making contact with new students early in their first year is very helpful. Dawson College, in Quebec, has had good early results from a retention management strategy based on early identification and early intervention. By surveying a large number of new students early in their first term, the institution can assess students’ needs, identify those at risk and learn enough about the students to counsel them effectively. Personal follow-up contacts have helped many “at-risk” students make it through the first term successfully. Further recommendations from Dawson College include enlisting faculty support for student services in initiatives such as mentoring programs for first year students.

St Mary’s University in Halifax makes extensive use of a Peer Support program. These student volunteers offer career counselling and new student orientation programs to help students make

the transition to university life. The fact that the student peer volunteers are well-trained, close-knit and accountable is seen as an important factor in their success.

The University of Ottawa's response to the CACUSS request lists programs focussing on peer support and early intervention. They list:

- peer Helping Program in Writing and Study Skills
- study Groups in Residence
- early career planning presentations in first year psychology classes
- numerous presentations during Welcome Week on succeeding at university and getting an early start on career planning.

They are also conducting research on personal counselling and persistence at university.

Patty Beatty-Guenther of North Island College in British Columbia, grouped the actions that colleges can take to improve student success into four categories:

- sorting (placement, getting students started in the right place)
- supporting (financial support, wellness)
- connecting (orientation, faculty/student events, becoming part of the community)
- transforming (of the student - personal counselling, study skills, etc., and of the institution - faculty development, etc.).

Of these, Dr. Beatty-Guenther's analysis suggests that sorting and connecting appear to be the most effective in student retention. For students in occupational programs, sorting strategies are the most important.

## **Summary**

The research for this study tends to support Dr. Beatty-Guenther's findings about the relative importance of "sorting" and "connecting" services. Sorting services involve identifying a student's needs and helping the student to meet those needs effectively. Connecting services involve making personal contact with students and fostering contact between students. Both of these are most effective when accomplished early on in a student's academic career. Counselling, by professionals or by peers, can serve both functions.

In this study, the literature search points to the benefits of early contact, peer-based services, caring faculty and a connection between students and the institution. For aboriginal students, being able to connect with others in a Native Students Society proved helpful. Colleges surveyed all offer counselling services and most find those services to be highly effective. Schools participating in the CACUSS study emphasize early intervention and peer-based support programs. They find that it is important for new students to make personal connections with other students, with faculty and with support staff early on in their college careers.

Peer assistance can come through formal tutoring and counselling or through less formal study groups. In whatever form, it can help students to make connections as well as provide academic guidance. Both the tutors and the students receiving the help benefit from peer tutoring programs.

### **Recommendations for Clearinghouse Partners**

- Recognize the value of support services and integrate Student services with the academic programs of the college.
- Have new students, especially those studying via distance, discuss their academic program with a counsellor at the beginning of their first semester. This establishes a personal connection early on and helps direct the student's course of study. This may be an opportunity for peer counsellors. This may also take the form of mentoring programs.
- Engage peer tutors and encourage formal and informal study groups among students.
- Encourage the formation of Native Students Societies to help aboriginal students adjust to the college environment.
- Arrange events for students and faculty to interact outside of the classroom setting.
- Career counselling should start early in order to help students to plot the academic portion of their career paths.

It should be noted that this research did not discover any services designed for distance delivery students. With a growing number of distance delivery students, Clearinghouse partners may want to do further research looking at their distinct service needs.

## Sources

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## Contacts

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**Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse  
Best Practices in Student Services  
Survey**

The Clearinghouse partner colleges want to develop a list of “best practices” in student services and retention. Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions. The results will help to identify those services that contribute most to students’ success.

**To begin, we would like to ask a few questions about your institution and your students.  
Where figures are requested, they need not be exact.**

1. Approximately how many students are enrolled in your institution?  
Full-time \_\_\_\_\_ Part-time \_\_\_\_\_
  - 1a. How has this changed over the past five years?
  
2. What is the population of the community or region that you serve?
  
3. How many students do you serve via Distance Delivery?
  
4. What percentage of your students complete their programs?
  - 4a. How has this changed over the past five years?
  
5. What percentage of your students are aboriginal (Indian, Inuit or Métis) or members of other visible minorities?

6. What changes have you observed in the make-up of your student body over the past five years?

**The rest of the questions ask about the services that you provide for your students.**

7. Which of the following services do you provide for your students (please check all that apply)?

- |                          |                            |                          |  |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Residences                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | Career counselling                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Off-campus housing service | <input type="checkbox"/> | Advocacy                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Financial aid              | <input type="checkbox"/> | Disability services                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Financial counselling      | <input type="checkbox"/> | Child care                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Academic counselling       | <input type="checkbox"/> | High school liaison                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Personal counselling       | <input type="checkbox"/> | International student help                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Peer support               | <input type="checkbox"/> | Assistance for older-than-average students |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Other _____                |                          |  |
- 

8. What services do you provide for aboriginal and visible minority students?

9. How are student groups (Students Union, Native Students Society, etc.) involved in the identification and delivery of services?

10. Which of your student services are used by the most students?

11. From your point of view, what is the most effective change that you have made in student services over the past five years?

12. Which of your student services, in your opinion, has the greatest impact upon your students' success? Why?

Any further comments on Student Services?

Name\_\_\_\_\_ Title\_\_\_\_\_

Institution\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you very much for taking the time to answer our questions. **Please return the completed survey by fax to Patrick Mackenzie at (403) 624-6184, by December 14, '98.**

We appreciate your help. Please indicate below if you would like to receive a copy of the resulting Clearinghouse report on Best Practices in Student Services.

Report requested Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_