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Summer Leadership Institute: A Qualitative Analysis



A Report by South Texas College's office of
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Background:

Studies show that low-income students and students who are potentially the first in their family to attend college have lower college enrollment than other students (Choy, 2002; National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Students from school districts served by South Texas College (STC) are particularly at risk. The area served by STC includes Hidalgo and Starr Counties. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2007) only 15% of Hidalgo County's population and 8.2% of Starr County's population have attained a Bachelor's degree compared to 27.4% in the United States. Furthermore, 37.5% of individuals in Hidalgo County and 41.4% of individuals Starr County live below the poverty level compared to 16.3% in the state of Texas and 13.2% in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

Various research studies have shown that college access outcomes have vital economic and social consequences showing that college graduates earn more than those with a high school degree and are more active in their communities (Baum & Ma, 2007; Kane & Rouse, 1995; National Conference on Citizenship, 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Part of the strategic directions adopted by STC, is a commitment to lead the "transformation of the region to a 'college-going' culture whereby attending and completing higher education is expected for all" (South Texas College [STC], 2008, p. 7). Part of the initiative taken by STC to create this college-going culture includes the creation of the STC Summer Leadership Institute (SLI). An informal inquiry of SLI participants indicated that many of them did not believe that college was a goal that was attainable for all their students. Research on student attainment indicates that such attitudes impede the success of students, but particularly minority students (Nieto, 2007; Sirota & Bailey, 2009). In addition to attempting to convince educator participants of the ability

and necessity of every student attaining a post-secondary education, the SLI aims to have its participants assist STC in making this attitude wide-spread throughout the educational and general communities of the area.

The mission of the program is as follows:

South Texas College is opening its doors to share with these interns what STC has to offer for current and future students. These interns will help in spreading the word to their schools and communities.

Additionally the SLI has set forth several program objectives:

- Teach how to establish a “College Going Culture” at my campus.
- Provide insight into South Texas College’s degrees, programs and services
- Provide an opportunity to work side by side with student services personnel
- Establish a strong commitment as an educator to promote student success

Research Questions

The SLI was created by STC as part of its effort to improve its College Bound outreach program. At the end of the SLI, participants were asked to develop a presentation that was designed to inform one of three audiences from their respective campuses: parents/students, fellow faculty/staff, or board members.

This particular study was designed to investigate whether or not the SLI’s goals were reached by examining what information interns thought most pertinent to present as part of their final projects.

The primary goals set by STC for the SLI are as follows:

1. Expand College Bound activities events at their respective schools
2. Understand the critical points of human development to support the educational experience of *all* students going to college.
3. Acknowledge and accept the “Key Barriers” students must overcome.
4. Promote the importance of academic advising and student mentoring services (10% vs. 90%)
5. Promote the importance of Center of Learning Excellence to provide instructional support services
6. Expand awareness of academic, technical and vocational career opportunities in the Rio Grande Valley

In all, this study is asking: Have SLI goals have been met as demonstrated by information presented by participants? What areas need to be addressed further and in more depth in future SLIs? Are there any other areas that SLI participants found important that were not explicitly stated as part of the SLI goals?

Methodology:

As part of the SLI program, participants were asked to develop a final presentation aimed at one of three entities: their school boards, their fellow faculty and staff members, or students and parents. All presentations were presented via PowerPoint and video-recorded.

Qualitative analysis of approximately six hours of video was conducted. Video recordings were uploaded onto NVivo8 which allowed for coding directly onto sections of video. Coding allowed researchers to uncover themes and topics SLI participants latched onto during the course of the internship and felt most pertinent to pass on to other individuals. Additionally, further examinations of the codes and development of qualitative memos during analysis uncovered whether goals of the SLI were met.

Findings:

Analysis of video data allowed us to pull out several main themes that were discussed during the course of SLI participants' final presentations. While these were not the only topics discussed during the course of the presentation, these themes were the primary topics that participants seemed to retain from the SLI.

Demographics

It is apparent that demographic information made a lasting impact on the interns. Participants left with a better understanding of why a college going culture needs to be expanded in the area served by their various school districts as well as STC.

A number of presentations included demographic information such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status, but it is also important to note that participants found it important to include academic information specific to STC, such as the fact that 66% of the STC student population is enrolled in Developmental studies and 80% of STC students are Pell Grant recipients.

Participants began to understand that STC serves the same constituents that they serve and thus, they have the same educational and social issues that must be addressed in an academic setting. Many of the mentioned risk factors such as poverty levels, low educational levels and low college readiness are issues that both STC and local school districts must confront in their efforts at instituting a college going culture in the region.

“Obstacles facing our community”

Also mentioned as part of the demographic information were academic challenges found in the local community. Challenges that were mentioned by presenters included, but were not limited to, high drop-out rates at the secondary level, low-levels of entry into post-secondary institutions, and students being labeled as “developmental,” or not academically prepared, once they do enroll in post-secondary education. As pointed out by presenters from Faith Christian Academy (FCA), “There are still miles to go.” When speaking of the obstacles faced by students, they added that “these are the areas we need to target in order to help build-up our region.”

STC has previously indentified barriers that are commonly faced amongst its student population in regards to fulfilling their educational goals. Almost all presenters mentioned these barriers and most also realized that their students also face similar barriers. As stated by a presenter from Mission CISD, “Our students have many barriers. It is *our* duty to break down these barriers.” Among the barriers that were specified and elaborated on were money and motivation. Mission CISD made the argument that the availability of financial aid means that money should not be a barrier for any student. La Joya ISD and Mission CISD also made it a point to discuss

motivation. Although this barrier came in as last on the STC's list, they felt that this was the primary barrier in their own institutions. La Joya ISD stated: "We can have the best teachers and technology, but if [the students] are not motivated there is no use." Presenters from both La Joya and Mission stated that it was their job as educators to motivate students to succeed.

Another important barrier that was mentioned by presenters was their students' statuses as first generation college students. It became apparent that interns understood the effect that this has on students. Presenters mentioned that the lack of parental knowledge in navigating through post-secondary institutions presents a major obstacle for such in attaining a college degree. Because of this lack of knowledge on the parents' part, SLI participants felt that it was their responsibility as educators to promote college to students, get them into college, as well as ensuring that they have adequate preparation for success once they do enter college. As put by a presenter from Edinburg ISD:

"Parents rely on the public school. Parents expect their children to go on to college. It is our job in the public school system to start gearing them up for that and taking the necessary steps to post-secondary planning."

It is apparent that participants left with a clear understanding of the risks and barriers that our community faces in their educational attainment. It is also clear that participants understood the SLI was meant to provide the necessary information that they can pass on to their students. By providing the right kind of information and motivation, barriers can be overcome and steps can be taken to instituting a true college-going culture in the area.

Advising/Counseling:

“They love what they do and it’s so contagious we want to go back and do the same.”

-Presenter from La Joya ISD

Student-centered advising

Most presenters explicitly stated that they were impressed with STC’s compressive institutional effort at providing students with quality advising and counseling services. This in turn seems to have motivated them to implement similar practices at their respective campuses. One of the pillars of STC’s advising model is the idea that advising is 90% relational and 10% informational. Although this idea was not stated directly by any presenters, the idea and spirit of this message was conveyed in a majority of the presentations. In particular, one presenter from La Joya ISD stated, “In order to make connections with students we must reveal who we are.” She went on to state that in order to be a good counselor one must be an active listener and should not be quick to be prescriptive, “We must listen first before we lead.” Opening the doors of communication between students and faculty/staff was something that resonated with the presenters and they began to understand that in order to reach their students they must make their services “student-centered.”

“STC has started a great model...it’s a constant student engagement and the workhorse of how they do it is the academic advisement,” said a presenter from IDEA Academy. He went on to state that STC is constantly engaging their students and as a result they are able to spot problems with students early enough to provide effective intervention.” A majority of presenters made it a point to emphasize that it was their responsibility as a public school to get students familiar with

college, “parents expect the schools to give [students] information for college.” Many presenters talked about the personal experiences they had with the advising center. While there they were able to see the interaction between students and advisors. A counselor mentioned that as a result of this experience she became more knowledgeable about STC’s website and she felt that this would help her when students come for academic/college counseling in better advising students on what classes to sign up for in their degree planning. Career cruising is another option that most presenters learned about and felt would be effective in helping students of all ages learn about their career interests and options.

When speaking of the counseling services provided by STC the majority of presenters highlighted that counseling services were free, confidential, and provided by Licensed Professional Counselors. Counseling interventions that were mentioned for STC students were mental health screenings, disability support services, credit smart program, PASS program, alcohol screenings, group counseling, individual counseling, and personal skills workshops such as time management. A few presenters thought the counseling services were a good way to reach first-time-in-college students and help them get through those first “30 hours which are the most crucial” in increasing student retention. A presenter from Sharyland ISD went on to state that, “what we’ve seen here at STC from their counseling center is that they bend over backwards to try to make sure they have a high student retention.” Another presenter mentioned that counseling services are also targeted for those students who are placed on academic probation in order to let them know what they need to be doing in order to be successful in college. The case management approach was also mentioned by a few presenters. Another

common theme when speaking of these services was the idea that STC is taking “students by the hand” to make sure that they do not get lost along the path of their educational journey.

STC’s advising and counseling services are separate entities and most presenters were very impressed with this practice. While most presenters agreed that they would like to see this same practice at their respective schools, many also mentioned that this is currently not common in most public school systems. Most counselors in public schools serve as both advisors and counselors, with a majority of the emphasis placed on academic and career counseling. As one presenter mentioned, “We as counselors get overwhelmed with their academic needs that sometimes we don’t really get to do the personal counseling that some of them really need to get ahead in their academics.

Beacon Mentoring

A few presenters mentioned that the Beacon Mentoring program may be a feasible alternative in dealing with this issue. Participants really seemed to have latched on to the Beacon Mentoring program. Beacon Mentoring allows staff or faculty to engage students so they may be redirected in cases where they may be going “off-track.” In the Beacon Mentoring program staff and/or faculty are assigned a number of students and each mentor meets with students 3-4 times a semester to give them mentoring services and help them address any issues that may be impeding their academic goals. Mentors also work with faculty so that they may keep track of students’ absences and follow-up with those students who have high absences. One presenter mentioned that the mentors responsibilities are to, “teach, advise, coach, encourage, and motivate.”

“Something that I learned through this experience is that really, there are so many safety nets for the students here at STC.” - Presenter from MCISD

Goals

Creating a College-Going Culture

Throughout the presentations, participants made numerous references to the goals they had in mind for their respective students, campuses, and districts as a whole. Most of all the presenters stated that their goals were consistent with the goals of the SLI, and STC in general, of building a college-going culture and getting *every* student into college. Most all agreed with this statement and planned to pursue this goal as well at their respective campuses. Several presenters mentioned it would be necessary to change the attitudes of students and parents to get them into the mindset that they *will* go to college. As one presenter from Mission CISD stated, " As a public school system, we must motivate our students to step foot on the [college] campuses that the RGV has." Other presenters such as La Joya ISD and McAllen ISD shared information in regards to the different goals set forth by STC's comprehensive plan. Such presenters said they would use this plan as a model to build a similar plan at their campus.

Most presenters realized that the goal of the SLI was to receive information that they could take back to their districts. Mcallen ISD stated that it was now their turn to share what they learned at the SLI with parents and students in regards to what STC has to offer, and give people the information they need to get into college. La Joya ISD in particular said that they designed their presentation as a tool to motivate teachers who have become complacent, and to encourage them to become more active in pursuing these goals.

A few presenters such as the IDEA Academy and Sharyland ISD mentioned that academics should not be the only thing that their institutions should focus on. They expressed a belief that more comprehensive action plans, which incorporate helping students in all aspects of their well-being including academics, career, social, and physical health, should be implemented at their respective institutions.

Improving Economic Vitality of our Region

Other presenters expanded on the goal of creating a college-going culture by indicating that this goal is only a stepping stone to ultimately improving the economic vitality of the region. A few presenters made specific mention of the benefit of having an educated population. For example, a presenter from the IDEA Academy stated that “the future of the Valley will be influenced by the level of the educational attainment of the population.” Several participants made it a point to mention the unemployment drop in Hidalgo and Starr Counties as evidence of STC’s impact on the community. “We should all expect [unemployment] numbers to go down, just as we expect our students to go to college,” stated a participant from Sharyland ISD. Most presenters mentioned the fact that McAllen is the third fastest growing area in the nation and most argued that this is why it is so crucial to create a college-going culture and increase the educational attainment in the region. Edinburg ISD went on to state that “having a college education is crucial to our world today” and they believe getting a college education is no longer a luxury but a necessity that will lead to many opportunities for students and the region in general. Several presenters also mentioned the economic benefit of having an educated workforce on the

community. In reference to the increases in the educational attainment the region has seen, and its impact on the local economy, a presenter for Sharyland ISD said:

We want to continue that trend. We want to get to a point in the valley where most of our students will not have to receive financial-aid...Why? Because we've done such a great job in these years to come...that is our challenge, to get our students more educated and successful...

Conclusion

The enthusiasm and passion displayed by participants in the course of their final presentations were apparent. The topics covered during the SLI had a positive effect on participants who stated that they want to implement changes in their individual school districts that would lead to the development of a college-going culture in the Rio Grande Valley.

During the course of presentations, participants displayed an understanding of the SLI program objectives. In addition to presenting ideas on how to establish a college-going culture on their respective campuses, they seemed to have a clear understanding of STC degrees, programs, and services, received insight from working side-by-side with student services personnel, and displayed a strong commitment as educators to promote student success.

The data made it apparent that goals 2 - 5 of the primary goals set forth for the SLI were met. The data did not allow us to conclude whether primary goals 1 and 6 were met since these particular goals require long-term analysis. While participants indicated that they plan to

implement activities that would help the SLI meet goals 1 and 6, it is unclear if there was planned follow-through after the conclusion of the SLI.

Recommendations

In order to ensure that primary goals 1 and 6 have been met as well as that primary goals 2 through 5 continue to play a role in participants' day-to-day activities at their individual school districts, the SLI should incorporate follow-up sessions with participants. These follow-up sessions would help ensure that SLI participants continue to receive pertinent information, and keep them updated on information and services that are available to their students and school districts.

Further research in the form of follow-up interviews and/or surveys would also allow for insight as to whether or not the SLI program objectives are being implemented on a long-term basis and whether primary goals 1 and 6 are being met in the form of expanded College Bound activities and activities that promote awareness of academic, technical and vocational career opportunities in the Rio Grande Valley.

Lastly, continuation and perhaps expansion of the program to train increasingly larger numbers of recruits from our educational partners is recommended in alignment with the STC strategic plan. The new knowledge and motivation gained by these educational partners can only serve to promote the college-going-culture across more educational institutions and among more of the people of this region.

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