

Research Briefs

KEY FINDINGS

- Some students do not believe that STC is operating under any sort of official or unofficial philosophy towards first-year students.
- Difficulties in navigating the rules and regulations of the college are compounded by first year status.
- A number of students felt that mandatory orientation would be helpful to first-year students.
- "Lack of preparedness" for the post-secondary experience should not be limited to academics.

For Practice:

IMPLICATIONS

- Make sure that faculty and staff are well-versed in the rules and regulations of the college to better assist students.
- Require students to attend an orientation session when they first enroll in the college.
- Find a way to assess first-year students' adaptation to a post secondary environment and provide any assistance they may need.

For Policy:

- Develop a philosophy towards first-year students that is followed by all employees at STC

For Research:

- Once philosophy is put in place, further research should be conducted to gauge whether implementation has made a difference in students' attitudes regarding their first year experiences.

Philosophy Dimension: Student Qualitative Study

A Foundations of Excellence Study

In an effort to improve the way in which South Texas College (STC) works with first-year students, and therefore continue to improve student retention rates, the college has joined with the First Year of College's Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year (FoE). As part of the model provided by this organization, STC has been asked to develop a "Philosophy towards first-year students." In focus groups conducted with students it was discovered that while students do not believe STC to be operating under a specific philosophy towards first-year students, a philosophy that addresses interaction with students needs to be developed that includes suggestions as to how to help ensure student success during the first-year of college.

Background

STC recognizes that retention and success of First Time In College (FTIC) students is paramount to meeting the college's comprehensive mission. It is apparent that efforts made by STC on this front have been successful with the proportion of all FTIC students at STC retained from fall to fall having increased from 50% to 57% in the last five fall terms. The increase for full-time, college-ready FTICs is even more dramatic having increased from 60% to 69% in that same time period. While these statistics are encouraging, STC realizes that there are still a large number of FTICs not re-enrolling and is dedicated to doing what it can as an institution to maintain this upward trend in retention rates.

In an effort to improve the way in which STC works with first-year students, and therefore continue to improve student retention rates, the college joined the Policy Center on the First Year of College's Founda-

tions of Excellence in the First College Year (FoE) on September 1, 2008. The goal of this collaboration is to "study all aspects of the new student experience and to produce a plan for institutional improvement leading to higher levels of student learning and persistence in college" (Policy Center, 2008). As part of the model provided by this organization, STC has been asked to develop a "Philosophy towards first-year students."

Purpose of Study

While FoE survey data collected at STC as part of the Web Enabled Survey System (WESS) in Fall 2008 suggests faculty and staff believe that the college operates under an unofficial, unwritten institutional and departmental philosophy towards first-year students (South Texas College, 2008), survey data collected from students as part of the WESS does not include questions regarding an institutional philosophy towards FTIC students.

This study was conducted to discover whether or not students

believe any sort of philosophy towards first-year students exists and what that philosophy encompasses so that an official one can be developed as part of STC's participation in the FoE.

The information gathered in regards to this subject area will be used by the FoE Philosophy Dimension Committee to develop an official philosophy towards first-year students that can be used by STC to insure the retention and overall success of FTIC students.

Methodology

A qualitative study involving a combination of interviews and focus groups was conducted to provide insight on the student perspective concerning an institutional philosophy towards FTIC students. A number of one-on-one interviews and five different focus groups were conducted (n=50). Students for the individual interviews (n=12) were recruited at the Pecan Campus. One focus group was conducted at the Starr County



Philosophy Dimension: Student Qualitative Study

A Foundations of Excellence Study

Campus and both the Pecan Campus and the Mid-Valley Campus were venues for two focus groups each.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the exception of one interview and focus group where equipment difficulties prevented a recording of proceedings. Transcripts along with written responses provided by students and focus group/interview observation notes were entered and coded using NVivo7, a qualitative software program utilized by Research and Analytical Services. Coding allowed for the discovery of common themes and ideas regarding students' views on STC's philosophy towards first-year students on both an institutional and departmental level.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to ask whether or not students believe that STC operates under an unofficial philosophy towards first-year students, whether students are aware of such a philosophy, and what they perceive this philosophy to be if they believe it does indeed exist. Furthermore, this study also seeks to uncover whether students believe there are different philosophies at play at institutional and departmental levels.

Key Findings

Qualitative analysis of data collected for this study suggests that students do not believe STC to be operating under any sort of philosophy towards first-year students at either the institutional or departmental levels.

Many students indicated that STC throws first-year students into a "sink or swim" with little or no consideration given to the fact that they are new to the post-secondary educational system and that all students, regardless of first-year status, are treated similarly by faculty, staff, and administrators at both the institutional and departmental levels. Several students repeatedly mentioned how "everyone is the same" at STC and added that they do not believe that first-year students should be treated differently or be given any sort of preferential treatment.

Despite several students indicating that first-year students should not be singled out, a number of students felt that their first-year counterparts have difficulty navigating the system. While students all seemed to agree that STC is dedicated to the success of first-year students, students do not always find the help that they are looking for. They pointed out how this is not a problem that is specific to first-year students, but that they are affected more by this due to the fact that they cannot rely on previous experience to navigate their way around the college environment.

Numerous students felt that a solution to this issue might be to make orientation for new students mandatory rather than voluntary. Students also suggested that participation in developmental study courses gives first-year students an advantage over other students who are not in remediation. This is supported by data which shows that the proportion of all First Time in College students receiving remediation who are retained from fall to spring (83%) has surpassed that of students with no remediation (82%).

One particular student emphasized how

a "College Success" course taken as part of his developmental studies course was instrumental to his continued enrollment and success as an STC student. When this particular student mentioned his college success course taken as part of his developmental studies classes, other students expressed how they wish a similar opportunity had been afforded to them. Students are enrolled in developmental courses when test scores show them to be lacking in one or more academic areas, but the term "unprepared" should also encompass other students who are not prepared for the post-secondary educational experience.

Students who participated in this study pointed out how many of their classmates enter into college unaware of the differences that they will encounter at STC when compared to their high school educational experiences. In addition to not understanding the difference in the amount of work that is involved, they also indicated that much of the "red-tape" that is in place is confusing and, at times, unnecessary. Students felt that while the majority of STC faculty, staff, and administrators are approachable and try to be helpful, many times they are misinformed about procedures and policies. They indicated that this was a large frustration among the whole student population, but that it was especially disconcerting as first-year students. Many students also emphasized how staff should be friendly and approachable. Although the majority of students indicated that they had only had good experiences in this area, other students explained how a "bad attitude" on the part of an STC employee could deter students from seeking out help when needed.

