Research Briefs

Summer Leadership Institute: A Qualitative Analysis

The Summer Leadership Institute (SLI) is a three-week internship provided by South Texas College (STC) in which educators from around the community are invited to attend and learn all about the services and opportunities STC has available to students. This study sought to determine if the goals set forth by the SLI had been met. Analysis of video recordings of presentations made by SLI participants revealed that participants, overall, left the SLI with a clear understanding of the objectives the SLI had set forth. Participants seemed to understand the importance of creating a college-going culture and the benefits this would have on the community.

KEY FINDINGS

- Participants demonstrated a clear understanding of the various educational challenges facing our community

- Participants realized that due to the large array of programs available at STC there was something here for *every* student

- Participants discussed various methods for embedding a "college-going" culture at their respective campuses

IMPLICATIONS

For practice:

- STC should continue to host the SLI and keep recruiting eager educators from the community to take part

For Policy:

- The SLI should make it a critical point to stress goal alignment between STC and other educational institutions in the region, as doing so is the catalyst for developing a "college-going" culture.

For Research:

- Follow-up interviews and/or surveys would allow for insight as to whether or not SLI participants have utilized and implemented what they have learned at the SLI at their campuses

Background

One of the strategic directions adapted by South Texas College, is a commitment to lead the "transformation of the region to a 'college-going' culture." Part of the initiative taken by STC in creating a college-going culture includes the creation of the STC Summer Leadership Institute (SLI). 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 STC are particularly at risk. According to the U.S. Census Bureau only 15% and 8.2% of Hidalgo and Starr County's populations have attained a Bachelor's degree, respectively, whereas the national rate is 27.4 (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 active in their communities (Baum & Ma, 2007; Kane & Rouse, 1995; National

Conference on Citizenship, 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Based on an informal inquiry of SLI participants it became apparent that many felt that college was not a goal that was attainable for *all* students. Research on student attainment indicates that such attitudes impede the success of students — particularly minority students (Nieto, 2007; Sirota & Bailey, 2009).

Purpose of Study

This particular study was designed to investigate whether or not SLI's goals of creating awareness of STC's programs and services, and promoting the advancement of a "college-going" culture were achieved.

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.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were: Did the SLI reach its outcomes of passing on pertinent information regarding STC's services and promotion of creating a college-going culture? Which items presented during the training seem to have made the greatest impact on participants? Do videos capture common themes of information that participants are choosing to pass on? What topics were the presenters most passionate about? Have SLI goals been met as demonstrated by information presented by participants?

Findings

Analysis of video data allowed researchers to pull out several main themes that were discussed during the course of SLI participants' final presentations.

Demographics
It is apparent that demographic information of the community made a lasting impact on the interns. Presentations included demographic information of the

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community such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status and educational level. Participants also provided information specific to STC, such as the fact that 66% of STC students are enrolled in Developmental Studies and 80% are Pell Grant recipients. Participants began to understand that STC services the same constituents that they serve and thus, they have the same educational and social issues that must be addressed in an academic setting. These areas of information provided participants with a clear understanding of the need for the expansion of the "college-going" culture.

Obstacles facing our community
Also mentioned 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 not being academically prepared once they do enroll in post-secondary education.

It became apparent that participants left with a clear understanding of the risks and barriers students in the community face and that the SLI was meant to provide the necessary information they can pass on to their students to help them overcome these barriers. As put by one presenter, "Our students have many barriers. It is *our* duty to break these barriers."

Advising/Counseling

"They love what they do and its so contagious we want to go back and do the same." - SLI Participant

Presenters stated that they were impressed with STC's comprehensive effort at providing students with quality advising and counseling services. This in turn seems to have ignited the idea

and motivation 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. The idea and spirit of this message was conveyed in a majority of the presentations. One presenter stated, "In order to make connections with students we must reveal who we are...We must listen first before we lead." Counseling interventions that were mentioned the most by presenters were mental health screening, disability support services, credit smart program, group and individual counseling, and personal skills workshops such as time management. One presenter 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 aspect of the counseling and advising services that interns latched onto was the fact that at STC's counseling and advising services are two separate entities within the college. Most presenters agreed that they would like to see this same practice at their respective schools as many mentioned that this is not the current practice at most school districts. Participants also seemed to be quite impressed with STC's Beacon Men-

toring Program and some mentioned that this program, if implemented at the public school level, could be of great benefit to students and alleviate issues with advisors at their campuses being overwhelmed with other responsibilities.

Goal Alignment
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. Other presenters expanded on this goal by indicating that this is only a stepping stone to ultimately improving the economic vitality of the region.

"As a public school system, we must motivate our students to step foot on the [college] campuses that the RGV has." - SLI Participant

Implications for Further Research
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.

Implication for Practice
Participants spoke with zeal about the various new interventions possible in establishing a college-going culture at their campuses. In addition, they also seemed to have a clear understanding of STC degrees, programs, and services, received insight from working side-by-side with students services personnel, and displayed a strong commitment as educators to promote overall student success. SLI should continue promoting cross-institutional dialogue in order to stress similar goals and passions at improving the educational and economic vitality of our region.