

Research Briefs

KEY FINDINGS

- Students dropped for non-payment did not gain awareness of policies
- Students expect deadline information delivered to them repeatedly
- Students have inaccurate information regarding timelines for registration
- Outside stressors minimize students' opportunities to visit Financial Aid and Counseling/ Advising Offices
- Students perceive Developmental courses as barriers and make erroneous decisions in hopes of avoiding these courses

IMPLICATIONS

For Practice:

- New method to collect student phone numbers
- Late Registration causes problems
- Instill knowledge of timeline

For Policy:

- FA penalties are barriers
- Revisit policy of dropping for non-payment

For Research:

- Data Team to revisit data
- Collection of additional data

A Qualitative Investigation of Students Dropped Due To Non-Payment

An *Achieving the Dream* Research Brief

South Texas College (STC) institutional data suggests that many students are not aware that they qualify for financial aid. Furthermore, students who do receive aid have challenges with tuition payment deadlines. As a result, over 1,100 students were dropped for non-payment in 2005. Qualitative data analysis offers promising opportunity to tap into student's awareness of financial policy, examine internal & external stressors that influence decision making, and identify barriers experienced during the process of applying for Financial Aid.

Background

South Texas College is one of several institutions asked to participate in the "Achieving the Dream (AtD)" initiative funded by the Lumina Foundation. In embracing the opportunity for increased student retention with systemic change, STC created a new approach model for Student Success. The three components in this model are: 1) Shared Accountability, 2) Student Assessment, Placement, and Matriculation, and 3) Comprehensive Student Advising.

Purpose of Study

The Shared Accountability taskforce received a specific charge from the Core Team and Planning and Development Committee (PDC) to address the problems with drop rates due to non-payment. The mission of the taskforce was to analyze these simple questions: Do our programs and services meet the needs and goals of our students? Do our students have enough information to succeed? What is the behavior of our students once they become aware and informed? How can all involved

be more accountable (even students)? This study sought to address these issues by creating a data collection instrument that measures these general questions.

Methodology

We incorporated two comparative qualitative research projects focused on student awareness of the financial aid application process and payment deadlines. The primary group was students dropped for non-payment in fall 2005. A faculty telephone team conducted in-depth interviews from a student data list (n=645) of those who were dropped in the fall for non-payment, and were successfully re-enrolled in the spring 2006. Due to phone number changes, cell phone costs, and scheduling conflicts, only 33 students were successfully contacted.

The Comparison Group consisted of students enrolled in College Success courses in spring 2006 (n=301). College Success Students were used in a prior AtD student barriers study and provided this research with the same useful characteristics: 1) Students are easily accessible, 2) Instruc-

tors provide a quick return of the data, 3) Costs of data collection is minimal, and 4) College Success Students are assumed to share academic at-risk characteristics, and financial need important to the themes of retention.

These students were asked to respond to the same instrument given to telephone in-depth interview subjects, but answers were given in a written essay format. The goal of this design was to uncover the human element of decisions, stressors, and barriers associated with payment and application deadlines. Lastly, the design provided insight into comparisons of those who were dropped for non-payment versus those never involved in being dropped and subject to the re-application process.

