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"RETAINING THE FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT THROUGH LEARNING COMMUNITIES: CHALLENGES OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM"

Marcellene L. Watson
EOP Learning Communities Coordinator
California State University, Sacramento

"In order to address the challenges that students face both academically and socially, the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at California State University, Sacramento has developed a program called Learning Communities."

Retaining and meeting the academic needs of first generation college students is a foremost issue that educators and counselors alike must address in the new millennium. With academia becoming increasingly more diverse, the need for community building and partnership among faculty and students is critical. This will enable the theme of community to be fostered in the college setting, as well as create a platform for campus dialogues on key issues in higher education. Such interaction will help to open the lines of communication and ensure a university atmosphere that is warm and accepting. Although these are reasonable goals for the retention and scholastic development of students of color, a means by which to carry out this vision of community must be readily embraced to combat the struggles of the first generation college student.

In order to address the challenges that students' face both academically and socially, the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at California State University, Sacramento has developed a program called Learning Communities. This program began in 1995 as a pilot project known as La Familia. It served as the first learning community within EOP and was comprised of 19 students. Given the successes of the program in 1996, EOP again offered a cluster of courses to 70 of its students in the fall of 1996. In 1997, CSUS became a participant in a 23-campus national consortium through a grant administered by Evergreen State University in Washington. During that year, 120 students participated in the EOP Learning Communities Program. In 1998, a program coordinator was given the charge to further develop the program. Teaching assistants were also hired to assist the faculty and helped to enhance the learning experiences of the students. In that year 165 students completed the program. Improvements, in comparison to previous years, were also evidenced by heightened grade point averages and student involvement in the program. In 1999, the program continued to grow and served over 187 students. All of these students participated in campus events, were required to attend a mandatory group tutorial related 10 their coursework, and formed natural bonds with faculty and other students within their learning community.

Given the high degree of success that the program has had over the past five years, it is the goal of the presentation to discuss some of the challenges that must be faced in the new millennium in serving the first generation college student. It is clear that we can no longer conduct business as usual, but we must expand our thinking and refine the approaches that we use to serve students. This is both challenging and requires us to

revisit our preconceived notions of what students need. Clearly, to retain the first generation college student, to promote their academic success, and to cultivate a communal environment where diversity is embraced, each stu

dent must be valued for the educational contribution they have to make. Each student must be given the educational tools that are essential to succeeding academically, to thriving beyond that critical first year, and to find a home away from home in a university setting that can often be intimidating.

The question to ask is how can these tools and resources be imparted to students in the academic arena? There are four primary areas that will be examined to enable the educator, administrator, and counselor to face the challenge of the new millennium. The first segment of the presentation will focus on Reflection and Future, which deals with the need to assess past successes and the importance of setting goals for the journey ahead. The second segment, Let's Get Connected, will encompass why building community among faculty and students can make all the difference in the world when it comes to student success. The third segment, Each OneTeach One, will address the issue of accountability in providing a comprehensive range of services to the first generation college student. The last segment entitled Don't Throw in the Towel, will focus on the importance of staying on course when challenges arise in dealing with a diverse population of students. Assessment data, program information, and group activities will provide the supporting framework for the presentation.

Additionally, the overall scope of the EOP Learning Communities Program at California State University, Sacramento will be used as a backdrop for the presentation. This very effective model will serve as a reference point for those approaches that our campus has utilized to ensure the retention and academic success of first generation college students within EOP in times past, in the new millennium and beyond.

Presenter:

Marcellene Watson is the Coordinator of the EOP Learning Communities Program at CSU, Sacramento She was hired two years ago to coordinate and develop the program geared toward first time freshman. She is also an active member of the CSU Executive Order 665 committee, which works arduously to assist students in the completion of their English and math requirements. As Coordinator of the Learning Communities Program, Marcellene brings a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Master's of Arts degree in Psychology with an emphasis in research from CSUS. In addition, she holds a Masters degree in Clinical Psychology from Biola University and is also pursuing doctoral study in her field of specialization. Together, Marcellene's educational background and wealth of experiences in psychology and academia well-equip her to provide leadership to the EOP learning community students at CSUS.