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Retaining Students of Color Through Gateway: A Student Mentoring Program

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Mentors help new students adjust both socially and academically. The presenters will share some of Gateway' keys to having a successful mentoring program.

At a small, private liberal arts college, a student mentoring program called Gateway has been implemented to improve the retention of diversity students on campus. The program matches incoming students with students of color who have been on campus for at least a year. The mentors help new students adjust both socially and academically. Incoming students are monitored and mentors are supervised by the Culture Diversity Office staff.

During the summer, new students are sent questionnaires along with a letter of welcome. They are able to provide information about themselves, i.e. hobbies, special interests, expected majors, etc. Their stated desire to be mentored by someone of the same ethnic group or gender helps the office match mentors and mentees. The office also considers high school transcripts in identifying academically high-, medium-, or low-need students. No mentor is assigned more than one high-need mentee because of the time involved.

Mentors are selected on the basis of grades (2.5 G.P.A. or better), willingness to work with the Diversity Office, recommendation of three faculty members, and a display of involvement. Mentors are recruited in the spring, receive 12-14 hours of training, and are carefully matched to an incoming student. During the summer, mentors contact their mentees. At an early orientation for new students, mentees and mentors spend time together and get to know each other individually as well as meet other members of the campus community.

Mentors maintain close contact with their mentees during the year to ensure that the students are attending class, getting any needed tutoring help, working through homesickness, and so on. Mentors keep a journal of contacts with their mentees. The journals are read by one of the interns in the Diversity Office. Another intern periodically sends and receives grade and attendance reports from each faculty person of each mentee.

The mentors introduce themselves to the faculty advisers of each mentee as well as to the residence hall staff so that in case of problems, campus personnel will know who to contact when they need suggestions for handling situations. The faculty has been cooperative once they understood that each incoming student has given his or her permission to be monitored.

At the beginning of each semester, mentoring is intensive but gradually slows as mentees

become familiar with the campus and the college process. Several times a year, programs are sponsored by the Cultural Diversity Office and Gateway that provide opportunities to get off campus (bowling parties, movie outings, etc.) and relax.

After one year, Gateway has demonstrated success. The school didn't lose any freshman at mid-term, compared to the six to eight that it lost in previous years. A second indicator of success is that the mentors are former mentees who ask to become mentors because of their experience in the program.

PRESENTERS

Danielle M. Hornett is the Associate Dean for Cultural Diversity in the student life area at St. Norbert College and author of several articles in professional journals. She received her Ph.D. in hearing impaired education from the University of illinois, Champaign-Urbana. Hornett was Director of the Learning Center at Mankato State University at Mankato, Minn., before coming to St. Norbert College. She also served in Costa Rica in the Peace Corps.

Jaclyn Piotrowski of Milwaukee, Wis., is a sophomore at St. Norbert College majoring in Spanish and business. She is a Student Office Worker in the Cultural Diversity Office. Piotrowski was one of the first mentees and will begin her training to become a mentor in the Gateway Program. She has been very active in her efforts to diversify a predominantly White campus.