

Transitions Dimension Report
Pulaski Technical College

Foundations Institutions facilitate appropriate student transitions beginning with outreach and recruitment and continuing throughout the period of enrollment. They communicate clear curricular/co-curricular expectations and possibilities, and they provide appropriate preparation and support for educational success. They are forthright about their responsibilities to students as well as students' responsibilities to themselves and the institution. These institutions create and maintain communication with secondary and other postsecondary institutions, families, employers, community agencies, and other sources of support for students.

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Current Situation:

5.1 Communication to Students:

Both students and faculty agree that one of the strongest areas of communication with students is communication of academic standards. 61 percent of students rated as high or very high the statement "prior to attending this college, to what degree did the college accurately communicate academic expectations for students". 77 percent rated as high or very high the communication of academic honesty, and 72 percent ethical conduct. While lower in ratings, the statements concerning plagiarism (57 percent) and standards of behavior in an academic community (60 percent) were still rated higher than most other areas of communication. 67 percent of faculty rated the statement of academic honesty as high or very high, 65 percent the question concerning plagiarism, 56 percent ethical conduct, and 47 percent standards of behavior in an academic community.

The college communicates academic expectations, primarily academic integrity and honesty, through a common syllabus. Some departments have specific expectations that are communicated through the syllabus and through other written and verbal communication. Little information about academic expectations is provided to students prior to enrollment. It is interesting that students rated the degree to which the college communicated academic expectations to students prior to enrollment at 61 percent; the committee could find no evidence of communication concerning academic expectations during recruitment or admission activities and a limited amount in the advising process for new students. And as evidenced by high DFWI rates in high-enrollment courses and by anecdotal evidence from students who drop because they are overwhelmed, we may not effectively communicate academic expectations to all students.

Information concerning the student code of conduct, including academic honesty, plagiarism, and standards of behavior are communicated in the student handbook, available both in print and on the web site. However, there is no point at which every student is given or required to have a student handbook.

There is no effective communication with students regarding out of class engagement activities. The Director of Student Life relies heavily on faculty and staff to communicate to students concerning student activities. With the high proportion of adjunct faculty it becomes difficult to communicate effectively with faculty so they in turn can communicate with students. Only 28 percent of students rated as high or very high the statement "To what degree has this college communicated the importance of out of class activities". 24 percent rated as high or very high the statement that the college provided opportunities for out of class activities of interest to the student. With the addition of the director's position the college has provided more activities for student involvement each semester. However, students may either not be aware of the opportunities, or the activities may not be of interest to students. Events are listed on the college Web site and in *The Insider* web newsletter for faculty and staff.

College costs and financial aid opportunities are communicated to students through information in the catalog and web site. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is distributed to prospective and current students by student services staff in the admissions and financial aid office and the counseling and advising office. The FAFSA is mailed to anyone in the file of prospective students. Included with the FAFSA is information about priority deadlines for application of financial aid, costs of college attendance and scholarships. Once the student has applied for aid the college communicates with the student concerning needed documents for processing the financial aid package. The student receives an award letter if the student is eligible for aid. Information about available scholarships is provided to students in the college catalog, admissions packet, college viewbook and the Web site. 66 percent of students rated as high or very high that the college accurately communicated financial aid opportunities; 55 percent responded that the college accurately communicated tuition and living expenses. Anecdotally reported, many students do not fully understand the implications of financial aid policies (other than attendance) nor of the options available to them regarding other forms of financial aid.

College costs and financial aid are communicated to the student after matriculation through the award letter and the business office statement. Both are mailed to the student and are available through the college student information system, Campus Connect. The financial aid office provides information about satisfactory academic progress policies for continued eligibility for financial aid through the catalog, Web site, and information included with the FAFSA and the award letter.

The financial aid office packages student loans and grants together in the award letter even if the student has not indicated an interest in loans. This may lead to some students taking un-needed or excessive loans without a full understanding of the consequences and benefits of loan debt. Due to insufficient staffing in the financial aid office it is difficult for students to obtain effective one-on-one loan counseling. Every student seeking a loan is required to complete online entrance and exit loan counseling. Many need to be reminded of information later as well. They seem to get overwhelmed—or think they completely understand the information—and forget information at a later date.

5.2 Communication of the Student Experience:

There is little evidence that the college effectively communicates the realities of college life prior to enrollment. The letter of acceptance to the college reminds students to attend the first day of class and to attend all class sessions. Some information is provided in the non-mandatory online orientation and on the advising page of the Web site concerning a reasonable number of credit hours to take in proportion to the student workload and family obligations. Although the CPI reports 49,000 hits to the online orientation from February 2006-September 2006 there is no way to track how many students actually complete the orientation, or the effectiveness of the information provided. The committee found no evidence of effective communication of this topic in college publications or during campus tours. Some of this information is discussed with advisees attending the SOAR advising program but the quality and depth of the information is heavily dependent on the adviser and the time available to work with the advisee.

5.3 Communication to Others:

There is no evidence of an effective communication plan with other entities that serve to facilitate the success of students. There is little to no communication with secondary school personnel concerning their role in facilitating student success in college. Most communication centers on the provision of college materials and recruitment of students from area high schools. The college hosts a luncheon for area secondary counselors and principals every other year. The luncheon for 2007 included a presentation about the market for high wage high skill jobs, the admissions process and scholarships. No planned communication takes place with the families (parents, spouses and children) of new students. The college held two college preview days in 2006 for prospective students and their families with approximately 40 students attending. Families are invited to some campus events. Only 25 percent of students rated as high or very high the statement "As a new student, to what degree has this college helped your family feel a part of your college experience". Although the college provides information and attends functions at a variety of support networks such as churches, community organizations, and local businesses there is no communication concerning how those networks can facilitate student success. Again, most communication with support networks is primarily recruitment based.

5.4 Establishing Connections:

The student survey ratings in this area are abysmally low. Only 41 percent rated as high or very high that the college has effectively connected them to new students, 38 percent with continuing students and 28 percent with faculty. Although individual faculty members may establish activities and situations to facilitate connections with students the college has no structured activities to encourage connections among new students, continuing students, or students with faculty. 45 percent of the students rated the statement "to what degree has this college connected you with academic support outside the classroom" as high or very high. The college provides tutoring through the learning assistance center. The Director of Learning Support Services emails the schedule of tutoring to faculty and staff each semester in addition to a monthly newsletter. Information concerning online tutoring is disseminated to students and faculty through email and written communication. Faculty are responsible for referring students to the center or for online tutoring. The Career Pathways program and the Trio Scholars program also provide tutoring to eligible students. 52 percent of faculty rated as high or very high the statement "To what degree does this institution assure that all new students experience academic support outside the classroom".

5.5 Academic Advising:

In summer 2005 the college implemented the Student Orientation, Advising, and Registration (SOAR) program to begin to address the advising needs of new students. New students to the college are required to be advised prior to registration. Adjunct faculty advise and register new students during designated times of registration (5-6 weeks in summer and fall). Although these advisers attend training sessions each semester they only interact with students for a few weeks per year. Skills tend to deteriorate during

the time between advising periods. Advising primarily revolves around selection of a degree plan and correct selection of classes for the degree. Voluntarily completed evaluations by new students of SOAR for summer 2005 and summer 2006 were excellent. Students rated the advising experience directly following the advising session, not later in the college experience when the effectiveness of the advising session could be better evaluated.

Full time faculty are only involved in student advising during late registration periods. No training is provided for full time faculty. As well as advising activities during SOAR the college advises many students during 2-day late registration periods. These students receive ineffective advising due to untrained faculty and inadequate time to advise each student. There is no process for advising continuing students. Advising is not mandatory for continuing students. 52 percent of students rated as high or very high that advisers adequately explained requirements for specific programs and majors; 50 percent that advisers helped select courses; 50 percent that advisers discussed what it takes to be academically successful; and 43 percent that advisers discussed future enrollment plans. Only 32 percent of faculty rated the effectiveness of academic advising at Pulaski Technical College as high or very high. Of those 55 faculty and staff that identify themselves as advisers, 94 percent rate as high or very high the statement concerning helping students select courses; 87 percent that they discuss what it takes to be academically successful, and 89 percent that they discuss future enrollment plans. 69 percent responded as high or very high that they receive adequate training to effectively address student needs. Expressed as a grade, the students rated most advising activities as a "C", the general faculty as a "C" and those faculty and staff who advise as a "B".

The college has dedicated a classroom in the campus center building as an advising center. However, the center is only open and staffed during SOAR dates (approximately 10 weeks a year). Students who have been through SOAR have an expectation for continued advising in the center; however, the center is unstaffed most of the year. The level of continuing students coming through SOAR advising has increased every semester. These students may not be able to meet with an adviser or counselor since the advising priority is new students. Therefore, a large number of underprepared students do not have adequate access to trained advising staff.

Opportunities and Challenges:

Students perceived the communication of academic standards as a strong point in relation to other college communication. As a grade the students gave the communication of academic honesty and ethical conduct a "B"; acknowledging the source of ideas not your own and communication of standards of behavior rated a "C". Faculty rated all areas as a "C". The common syllabus has improved consistent communication of academic standards after enrollment. Mandatory on-campus and online orientations could be a way to communicate **prior** to enrollment. Additional information can also be added to the college Web site. Advisers can also include verbal and written information in the advising session. The student handbook is the primary communication piece for standards of student behavior (student code of conduct). Every student should receive a handbook at a designated point in the enrollment process.

Students appear to be unaware of or disinterested in out of class activities. The recent addition of the director of student life is a first step in improving communication in this area. The college should consider developing an in-class survey to ask students what type of activities would be of interest to them. The student e-mail system planned for implementation in fall 2007 may improve communication of activities. The college student success committee is currently considering a proposal to implement a student newspaper which could also improve communication of student activities. The college should also develop and promote co-curricular activities that require student participation in relation to a course objective or course content. The launch of a common book experience in College Seminar for fall 2007 will be the first attempt at creating co-curricular activities for students.

Students rated the communication of financial aid opportunities as higher than communication of tuition and living expenses. Actual tuition and fee costs should be included in letters to prospective and/or applicant students. The committee recommends that the process of automatically packaging loans in the award letter be reviewed. Those students seeking loans should be encouraged to receive loan counseling with a financial aid adviser in addition to the online entrance counseling. The low proportion of financial aid counselors to students makes it difficult to repackage loans and to meet with students. Group loan counseling and money budgeting sessions for students could be one solution.

The realities of college life-time required to attend class and study, college and family obligations, and college and work- can be incorporated into mandatory orientation sessions and into the initial advising session. Additional information can be added to the college Web site and online orientation. The college was recently awarded a Title III grant, one part of which is to strengthen student support services. Pilot orientation sessions for a cohort of students will begin this summer. Faculty should participate in the development of both online and on campus orientation sessions. Faculty can participate in orientation sessions by demonstrating how instructors teach and what their expectations are for students. An advising committee has been formed to begin improvement of new student advising and to begin development of a faculty advising program for continuing students. These initiatives should be a high priority in the campus community.

The college has a limited number of staff to contact other entities that can support the success of our students. It will be difficult to improve the quantity and quality of communication unless a plan can be developed for written or e-mail communication with secondary school personnel, churches and the business community.

Communication with the families of PTC students is non-existent. The committee recommends a family-oriented newsletter be explored as an option for increasing the level of communication with families. The college has a relatively small number of students directly out of high school and many students are non-traditional students with spouses and children. Communication would be most effective if it could be targeted to specific groups, such as parents and/or spouses. A survey to ask students about desired campus activities can also ask questions about activities of interest to their family members.

Student connections with other students and with faculty and staff are an important factor in retention. Certainly, on campus orientation sessions can be one avenue of connection. Orientation sessions directed toward specific groups of students (allied health, business, technical) could be an effective way to connect students with other students with similar interests and to faculty. Systems to connect students online with other students and faculty could be effective for our commuter population. Out of class engagement opportunities of interest to the student can be another way to connect these populations. And, learning communities should be explored as a way to connect students to one another for study and social interaction. Information about learning support services can be communicated through orientation, advising, and the upcoming student email system. However, faculty will play a large role in communication of learning support to their students.

The college has made improvements in advising but still faces many challenges in the development of an advising program. The Title III grant is an opportunity for development and funding of a comprehensive program, although many entities, especially faculty, should be involved and participate in the development and implementation. The advising process can not be separated from the entire process of communication and support of new students. In the development of a comprehensive advising program the college must consider the process of recruitment, admissions, orientation and registration as well as the process for continuing advising support throughout the student's tenure at PTC.

Currently Title III staff and the director of counseling and advising are forming a committee to develop a comprehensive advising plan. This committee will explore ways to improve new student advising, and to involve faculty in a plan for advisement of continuing students. Some issues that will be addressed include:

- Should advising be mandatory for all students, both new and continuing?
- Should advising responsibilities be an expectation of all full-time faculty?
- What will be the criteria for selection of advisers?
- Should the college consider some number of professional advisers to staff the advising center?
- How can an advising center for new students be linked with faculty advising for continuing students?
- How will undecided students be advised?
- What level of online advising should be offered?
- How will advising be provided for off campus locations?
- How will professional development be provided for faculty and staff who advise?
- How will academic advising, and advisers, be evaluated?
- What will be the administrative reporting channels for professional and faculty advisers?

Training for new student advisers should be expanded, and training for faculty will need to be developed. Consulting services are available at a reasonable cost through the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). These services should be utilized to focus the advising committee as they begin the task of developing a campus wide advising program.

Sources of Evidence:

College publications: catalog, viewbook, student handbook.

College communications: letters to prospective students, acceptance letter, financial aid letters.

College common syllabus

College Web site

Surveys: faculty staff, student, SOAR evaluations

Interviews: vice president for academic affairs, director of student life, director of admissions, director of financial aid, director of counseling and advising, director of learning support services, career links coordinator, enrollment coordinator.

Recommended Grade: D

Recommended Action Items:

- Orientation (*High priority*)

The committee proposes the development of a mandatory on-campus orientation program for first time entering students. Orientation targeted to specific groups or majors should be explored. Faculty should be involved in the development of an orientation program and participate in the delivery of sessions.

- Online Orientation (*High priority*)

The current online orientation should be revised to include the same information as on-campus orientation. A mechanism to track student completion of the orientation and to measure understanding of the material should be incorporated.

- Advising (*High priority*)

The College should continue development of a comprehensive advising program. The committee recommends using NACADA consultants as a first step in development of the advising program. A select group of faculty and staff should attend the NACADA summer advising institute. Title III funds can assist with related expenses.

- Academic Expectations (*Medium priority*)

Additional information concerning academic expectations and the realities of college life should be added to the college Web site. Faculty should develop this web space to include the amount of time needed for assignments, expectations of faculty, sample assignments, study strategies, and grading criteria.

- Out of class activities (*Low priority*)

A survey instrument should be developed to determine the out of class activities of interest to students and their families.

- Family newsletter (*Low priority*)

The College should consider the development of a newsletter or some other communication piece for families of students.

- Loan counseling (*Low priority*)

The process of packaging all available loans in the initial award letter and expansion of the loan counseling process should be reviewed.