Supporting Student Success through CONNECTING ACTIVITIES

Info Brief Series for Community Colleges

This Info Brief series describes strategies for community colleges to help students access services, activities, and supports relevant to their individual needs and goals to boost college retention and success.

Other Briefs in this Series

Physical Health Services
Mental Health Services
Academic Skills Training & Assistance
Housing & Transportation
Financial Assistance, Planning & Management
Adult & Community-Based Services & Opportunities

Introduction to this Series

Community college leaders are increasingly concerned with finding ways to better support and engage students in an effort to improve college completion rates. These concerns are warranted given the fact that only 39 percent of students who enrolled in community college in 2008 graduated within six years (Shapiro, Dunder, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015). Of those who did not graduate, 18 percent were still enrolled in any post-secondary institution and 43 percent were no longer enrolled at any institution six years after enrolling.

To increase persistence and completion, many students need assistance connecting to services, activities, programs, and supports relevant to their individual needs and goals. Postsecondary institutions can play a significant role in helping students access these services, supports, and opportunities. This assistance is referred to by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) as “Connecting Activities.” While no one institution can or should meet all of a student’s needs, every institution can help students locate and connect to other service
providers, sources of support, and opportunities beyond those their organization provides.

Research shows that providing students with a comprehensive array of supports increases their chances of success in postsecondary education. In a study on persistence of students receiving Student Support Services through the TRIO program at community colleges, 86 percent of freshman in TRIO persisted to the following fall compared to only 65 percent of students in a comparison group drawn from a national sample (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Fifty percent of the TRIO participants attending two-year institutions either completed their degree or certificate program or successfully transferred to a four-year institution within four years of enrolling compared to 28 percent of students in the national sample. TRIO Student Support Services include tutoring, guidance in course selection, and assistance in applying for financial aid with the goal to increase persistence and graduation rates of low-income students, first generation students, and students with disabilities.

Community colleges are a crucial point of access to higher education for low-income and minority students (Alfonso, 2014; Rouse, 1995). These two-year institutions provide coursework, certification, and associate degrees for people seeking workforce skills, and they lay the academic foundation for students planning to transfer to four-year colleges and universities. As community colleges take steps to boost student completion rates, it is important to consider specific ways to better support students with disabilities as well as other diverse student groups.

According to the American Association of Community Colleges, 12 percent of community col-
College students in 2011-2012 disclosed a disability (AACC, 2015). There has been a greater increase in enrollment of students with disabilities at community colleges than at four-year institutions (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010). In 2011-2012, community colleges enrolled 1.3 million or half of all students with disabilities entering postsecondary education (Van Noy, Heidkamp, & Kaltz, 2013). While research indicates that college students with disabilities are more likely to complete a postsecondary credential at a community college than a four-year institution, their completion rates are still quite low (Fichten, et al., 2012). In 2009, 13 percent of students with disabilities who enrolled in a community college had graduated from their program within four years of leaving high school according to the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (Newman, et al., 2010).

Clearly, community college completion rates of the general student population and students with disabilities specifically are far from where they need to be. Fortunately, there is a wealth of research available on factors impacting student success and strategies for increasing persistence to inform colleges as they consider how to intervene. NCWD/Youth developed this series of info briefs on Supporting Student Success through Connecting Activities to raise awareness about the significance of connecting students to services and supports, such as health insurance, financial assistance, housing, and transportation, and assisting them in navigating these and other services and supports relevant to their individual needs and goals. Also, these briefs provide practical examples of how some colleges are supporting students and relevant resources for implementing connecting activities at community colleges. This introductory brief begins the series with an overview of the connecting activities all students need, including those specific to students with disabilities. Subsequent briefs in this series discuss one or more of the connecting activities, identify strategies to consider, and provide practical examples from colleges along with related resources. Read these briefs and other resources at www.ncwd-youth.info.

**CONNECTING ACTIVITIES OVERVIEW**

Over a decade ago, NCWD/Youth conducted an extensive review of literature from research, demonstration projects, and leading sources on effective practices in an effort to identify what all youth, including youth with disabilities, need to make a successful transition to postsecondary education, employment, and independent adulthood. At the time, NCWD/Youth was primarily focused on assisting workforce development agencies, schools, and other organizations and agencies nationwide with preparing youth at the secondary school level to succeed in achieving their education, employment, and life goals after high school. Based on this review, NCWD/Youth produced a framework called the Guideposts for Success, which outlines what youth need within five areas, one of which is referred to as Connecting Activities.

In 2014, NCWD/Youth expanded its work to include a focus on supporting community colleges and other postsecondary institutions to improve the postsecondary and employment outcomes of all students, including students with disabilities. To inform this work, NCWD/Youth reviewed how well the five Guidepost areas aligned with research on postsecondary persistence and community college completion for students with disabilities. They found that many of the same services and supports must be considered...
once students enter postsecondary education because they help to ensure student success.

With respect to Connecting Activities, research indicates that all postsecondary students may need one or more of the following:

- physical health services;
- mental health services;
- transportation and affordable housing;
- academic skills training and assistance;
- financial assistance, including financial planning and management training and assistance; and
- connections to adult service agencies and other community-based services and opportunities (e.g., recreation, sports, faith-based institutions).

In addition, students with disabilities may need one or more of the following:

- appropriate assistive technologies;
- community orientation and mobility/travel training (e.g. accessible transportation, bus routes, housing, health clinics);
- connections to community-based supports such as independent living centers and other consumer-driven, community-based support service agencies;
- personal assistance services, including attendants, readers, interpreters, or other such services; and
- benefits planning counseling, including information regarding the myriad of benefits available and their interrelationships so that youth may maximize those benefits in transitioning from public assistance to self-sufficiency.

While availability and accessibility of all these services and supports are essential, colleges must be thoughtful in how they go about connecting students to comprehensive supports in order to increase the likelihood that students will follow through and benefit from what is offered (McDonnell, Soricone, & Sheen, 2014). Research evidence suggests that caring staff and individuals play a critical role in helping students to understand what’s available that fits their needs and supporting them through the process of connecting to and effectively using services (Oertle & Bragg, 2014; Karp, 2011). In addition, Jobs for the Future recommends the following strategies for implementing comprehensive support services:

- Provide a comprehensive set of supports for underprepared and nontraditional students;
- Make supports an integral part of the program model;
- Develop partnerships to complement college support resources;
- Coordinate the provision of support service offerings among entities;
- Communicate the availability of support services to students and faculty;
- Reduce barriers to student access to services;
- Keep in mind the value of relationships in supporting students; and
- Work to ensure adequate resources for support service provision (McDonnell, Soricone, & Sheen, 2014).

REFERENCES

Community Colleges and Latino Educational Opportunity, The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, Cambridge.


The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, D.C. NCWD/Youth is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into service strategies. This Info Brief series was written by Kathryn Nichols and Mindy Larson. To obtain this publication in an alternate format, please use the contact information below. This Info Brief is part of a series of publications and newsletters prepared by NCWD/Youth. All publications will be posted on the NCWD/Youth website at www.ncwd-youth.info. Please visit our site to sign up to be notified of future publications. This document was developed by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, funded by a grant/contract/operative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (Number #OD-23804-12-75-4-11). The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. Nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply the endorsement by the U.S. Department of Labor. Individuals may reproduce any part of this document. Please credit the source and support of federal funds.

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