Best Practices Research Summary for Achieve the Dream

**Institutions Included**

Skagit Valley College – public community college in northwest Washington State  
Drexel University – private, medium sized, urban university in Philadelphia, Penn.  
Colorado State University – large public Land Grant University in Fort Collins, Colorado  
Michigan State University – very large, public, four-year Land Grant University in East Lansing, Michigan

The five sites (out of 30 projects in the SSS National Study's longitudinal examination) best practices study ranged from a small, rural community college to one of the largest state universities in the nation. The sites include a historically black college and a small-town branch campus of a large public institution.

**Students Targeted**

First Generation  
Low-income  
Minority  
Freshman
SUMMARY

Best practices impacted individual effects on GPA and year-to-year retention

- Astin’s Theory of Involvement - students learn more the more they are involved in both the academic and social aspects of the collegiate experience.
- Tinto’s Student Integration Model - social & academic integration = retention
  - Greater impact on low-income, first generation students
  - First generation students derive strongest positive benefit
- Engagement
- Structured freshman year experience programs – block registering, early intervention, linked courses, supplemental instruction,
- Provide academic support for developmental and popular freshman classes
- Extensive student service contacts
- Providing services to groups
- Building communities of students
- Offer participation incentives
- Target participant recruitment
- Enroll students at the time of admission
- Connect with students early and powerfully
- Conduct bridge and orientation programs
- Early intervention for students struggling
- Dedicated staff with strong institutional attachments
- Proper advisement
- Orientation stresses elements of social, emotional, and cognitive development
- Pre-freshman-year academic and social preparation

Advising

- Frequent contact and interaction needed
  - Early warning and feedback
- Coordination with other campus departments
- Intrusive advising provides stronger feedback and connection
  - Grade monitoring
  - Mid-term progress checks
  - Structured - control over what courses students take
  - Career planning
  - Course Drop approval
  - Individual student assessment
- Can be done by peer mentors or advisors
  - Role modeling by successful students
  - Leadership and academic skill development
- Grade monitoring
- Connection to campus resources
- Encourage students to enroll in courses they are likely to perform well and where academic assistance is available
○ Can be done as group advising

**Learning Communities**

○ Known best way to address summary issues
○ Strategy to promote “shared learning” and “connected learning” among students
○ Forms supportive peer group
○ Blurs lines between academic engagement and social engagement
○ Students spend time in groups oriented around academics increases time on task
○ Increases academic performance and persistence toward graduation
○ Groups of students take all courses in common (cluster courses)
  ○ Courses linked by theme and by seminar
○ Freshman year is the most critical
○ Velcro effect- students need to establish connections with other students
○ Especially for developmental and popular freshman classes
○ Opportunity for research/data collection
  ○ Easily identified freshman groups
  ○ Group compared with campus
  ○ Explore retention rates, academic performance, satisfaction, involvement and leadership development
○ Students form study groups naturally
○ Start with limited number of sections
  ○ Evaluate pilot sections
  ○ Gradually expand
○ Seamless learning environments
  ○ Capitalize on the interrelatedness of the in and out of class experiences
  ○ Courses are linked, team-taught and thoroughly integrated
  ○ Help students reach potential
  ○ Faculty report that they help keep teaching “fresh” since it encourages flexibility, creativity, and crossing of disciplinary boundaries.
○ Combine with other College retention initiatives
○ Provide appropriate faculty development support for the design, initiation, and ongoing development of the learning community
○ Use variety of setting to debrief those involved
○ Summer bridge programs
  ○ Students enroll in a structured academic program during the summer prior to their first semester
  ○ Courses in math, writing, science, critical thinking, communication, and a summer seminar
  ○ Courses are credit and non-credit
  ○ Students assigned peer mentor and advisor from permanent staff
○ Academic year programs
○ Linked summer-and-academic year programs
Learning communities can be linked (typically a course in writing linked with a literature or social problems course like history), freshman interest (group of freshman that take linked courses together and hold an interest group that meets regularly to discuss the courses), cluster (separate courses, but taken by the same group of students), or coordinated courses (one large class that meets several times a week, 4-6 hours at a time together - i.e. writing, history, communications).

Assessment
- Should be assigned to some individual who has no involvement with the administration or the design of the program
- Perceived by campus community as researcher with high integrity and outstanding credentials
- Build on methods or resources immediately available
- Produce results in relatively short period of time
- Use quantitative and qualitative data
- Avoid narrow definitions of success

Study Groups
- Less formal than supplemental instruction or labs
- Students meet in groups outside of class to discuss class content
- Promotes active learning and student engagement
- Provides “safe” learning environment
- Integrates instruction/modeling of effective study strategies
- Has task and socio-emotional support dimensions
- Especially needed for gatekeeper courses
- Reinforce content of the course and basic study skills
- Can be part of the structured learning community
- Especially needed for developmental and popular freshman classes
- Staffed by professional or upper division students who have taken the course (some use faculty, lab supervisors, SI leaders)
- Regularly scheduled sessions – usually once or twice a week - more before exams
- Group has a facilitator

Tutoring
- Especially for developmental and popular freshman classes
- Can be intrinsically scheduled into the class
- Tutor attends class with students daily and conducts small group sessions on the subject matter after class
- Structured or informal
- One-on-one less common than group
- Students need frequent contact with tutor
- Can be part of the structured learning community and conducted as supplemental instruction
**References**


