Beautiful Idea:

ESL Learner Persistence in Developmental Classes at Hostos Community College: A Quantitative and Qualitative Study

Co-Developers:

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Project Description:

Students in developmental reading and writing classes at Hostos Community College are among the most at-risk for leaving college without completing a degree. We know these students and their institutions face enormous challenges. However, the reasons so many of these students do not persist to degree completion are less well-known than the statistics documenting their inability to persist. We wish to begin a longitudinal study exploring reasons behind the low persistence rates among low-income, minority, and second-language students who begin their college careers in developmental classes. We will conduct this study in developmental reading and writing classes at Hostos Community College during the Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 semesters.

Since the late 1970s, college and university student retention and persistence has been a fast-growing field of study and a matter of great concern to institutions of higher education. The research that has been done fairly clearly delineates factors that place students at risk for departing before degree completion. The International Centre for Student Retention sums up the findings in a list of five factors most directly affecting students' abilities to continue their studies: 1) Academic preparedness, 2) Campus climate, 3) Commitment to educational goals and the institution, 4) Social and academic integration, and 5) Financial aid. Located in the South Bronx, Hostos uniquely attracts a majority population of students are among the most at-risk, facing barriers in all five of these categories.

Goals and anticipated outcomes

Our goal is to further develop current understandings of the ways that Hostos might effectively and efficiently assist its students as they move toward degree completion. Because many studies of persistence and retention take place in selective four-year institutions, it has been difficult to separate out factors particularly pertinent to students who attend open admissions institutions. Only when institutions such as Hostos have a fuller understanding over time of the student experience among its most at-risk populations will it be able to develop more effective tools that will increase the numbers of these students who succeed in completing two-year--and hopefully four-year--degrees.

We will use both quantitative and qualitative tools in order to assess students' experiences. We will collect quantitative data by asking students in participating developmental classes to complete a brief survey that uses Tinto's "interaction theory" as developed from Chickering's six "vectors" for student success: 1) educational experience, 2) development of skills and knowledge, 3) faculty contact, 4) personal and social growth, 5) sense of community, and 6) commitment to and satisfaction with the institution. Hostos is initiating the Community College Survey of Student Engagement in Spring 2010, and this will allow us to compare the results of our survey with the data Hostos collects using the national survey. We will collect qualitative data by asking students to write a personal narrative in the first two weeks of the semester, and two reflective essays on their semester academic and social experiences, one each at the mid- and end-points of the semester. We will assign students codes so that we may allow students anonymity while at the same time tracking students'
experiences and persistence over time. All data will be kept as anonymous as possible while also allowing the results for individual students to be collected over time. Because existing data suggests that students' assessments of their overall experiences fluctuate as the semester progresses and their performances align—or not—with academic and social expectations, we are administering surveys and written narratives three times over the course of the semesters so as to chart changes in students' experiences, expectations, performances, and plans.

**Support in the literature**


**Timeline for implementation**

We are currently in the process of coordinating my plans with the Office of Academic Affairs at Hostos, with the help of Richard Gampert, Director of Institutional Research and Student Assessment at Hostos. We have contacted Dennis Gibbons, Chair of the Hostos Institutional Review Board, regarding our intention to submit paperwork requesting permission to work with students as part of this research project. In Summer 2010, we will prepare and print quantitative and qualitative tools and also arrange scheduling with instructors of participating classes. During the Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 semesters, we will collect and analyze the data. By the end of Spring 2011, we expect to have enough data to write a report analyzing preliminary results as well as ramifications for institutions addressing the problem of low persistence rates among similar groups of students.