

TAKEAWAYS

Want students to stay in school? Connect them with resources!

By Shelby Lynch



According to Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society, only "38 percent of community college students will complete a degree and/or transfer to a four-year college."

I attend Mesa Community College in Arizona. This academic year, our institutional advancement (IA) department established the Caring Connections: Retention

Resources initiative, and my Phi Theta Kappa College Project Team and other student organizations helped carry out this project, connecting students with resources in order to bolster student retention rates.

Surveys administered by the college show the most pressing concerns students face are financial instability, food insecurity, lack of healthcare and transportation issues. These issues contribute to a 15 percent withdrawal rate every semester at our college, stressing the need for this project.

We promoted resources that would combat these issues, such as our food pantry, transportation vouchers, employment options and scholarship opportunities. In fall 2019, we connected 500 students with resources in-person and thousands digitally. After being involved in this project, I have seen the positive impact this program has made in students' lives and encourage other colleges to make their resources more accessible. Here are three effective tips that college leaders can use to improve student retention and establish a stronger sense of belonging.

Connect the correct resources to the right students. According the American Association of Community Colleges, 42 percent of the nation's community college students are the first in their families to attend college. Thirteen percent are single parents, 12 percent have disabilities, 6 percent are non-U.S. citizens, and 3 percent are veterans. Students of all ages and backgrounds attend community colleges, including online students and "parking lot students," a term my college uses to describe those who go from the parking lot, to class, and back to the parking lot, making it difficult for them to easily access resources.

College leaders should associate the correct resources with the correct students by collaborating with organizations about resources that can best support them. Marketing all resources to all students is not as beneficial as promoting them to specific groups.

Inspire and encourage students to join clubs and organizations. Our college's Clubs & Organizations web page explains the benefits of joining a club, including professional experience, fellowship and skills in leadership, organization, networking and management. They create a support system and are referred to as a "true strength" of our campus community, which I agree with because I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't joined campus organizations. College leaders should strive to be present in-person and inform students of the benefits of joining clubs.

Promote resources in-person and incorporate them into the curriculum. To create a more personal experience for students, host engaging campus events that connect students with resources from all over campus—all in one place.

In addition to having resources listed on the college's website, incorporate these into the classroom curriculum by notifying students in-person. Most professors are required to include resources at the end of their syllabus, but not every student reads its entirety. Caring Connections promoted weekly resources that were displayed on posters in the back of classrooms—3,400 posters total. Professors acknowledged the posters weekly and explained the resources out loud, altering the classroom environment.

College leaders, try to connect resources with students in-person in order to create meaningful relationships. With these three tips, I hope you make positive changes at your community college so that all students can easily access resources to complete college, which is the ultimate goal.

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