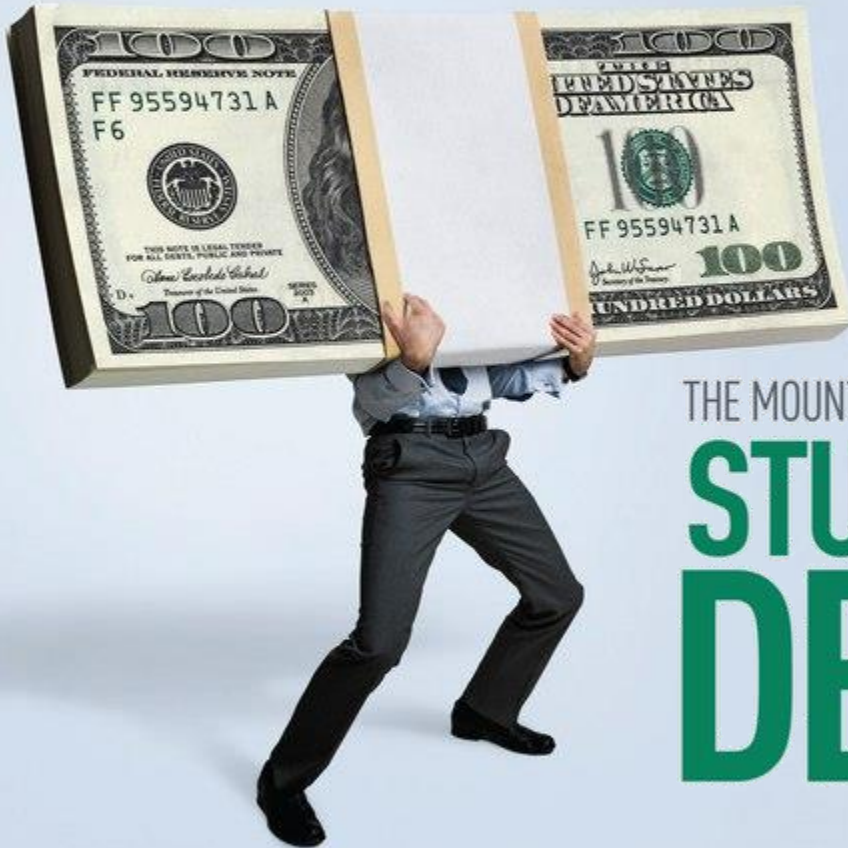


AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

# Community College Journal

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## THE MOUNTING PROBLEM OF **STUDENT DEBT**

Managing Student  
Default Rates

5 Strategies for Student  
Recruitment and Retention

Finding Funds to  
Pay for College



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## 5 Strategies to Improve Student Retention and Success

BY BILL LAW

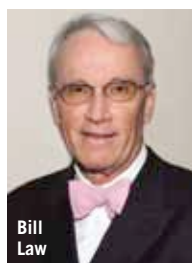
**W**e spend so much of our time recruiting students that it's easy to lose sight of what's most important—ensuring that our students finish what they start.

The staff at Florida's St. Petersburg College (SPC) has heard me say many times that access to education changes perceptions, but degrees and certificates change lives. Good, sound research tells us that a college credential improves a person's earning potential, decreases the chance of unemployment, and enhances overall quality of life.

In the fall of 2012, our institution undertook what we hoped would be a game-changing initiative for our students called The College Experience: Student Success. Our goal was simple: Give our students the support they need to earn the degree or certificate that would change their lives.

We faced significant challenges, similar to those many of our fellow community colleges share:

- Far too few of our students were finishing their courses with a C or better.
- In our 10 most highly enrolled courses—the ones that are the gateway to an associate degree—about a third of our students consistently were unsuccessful.



- The news was even worse when we looked at how our minority students, particularly our African-American male students, were faring.

Eighteen months into this effort, I couldn't be prouder of what our students, faculty, and staff have accomplished together by being intensely focused on our goals and working together across the organization to analyze what works while making continuous adjustments for improvement.

It is clear that the day-to-day, boots-on-the-ground, "try it, fix it, live it" approach is working for our students.

For three straight semesters, students have made significant academic improvements. The advances are most notable among minority students,

particularly African-American and Hispanic males.

Our job isn't done. We continue to build on the initial foundation. Constant analysis and focus are critical.

Every Wednesday morning for 30 minutes, key administrators, frontline staff, faculty, and other personnel from across the college meet to analyze data on The College Experience program so that we can continue to hone our support for student success and get more of our students to the finish line.

Below are five key strategies to improve student retention and success based on our experience. With any luck, these strategies will work for you, too.

### 1 Expanded Out-of-Class Support

Perhaps our most important effort involved expanding our out-of-class academic support. Our goal was to improve the course success rate without lowering academic standards.

#### What we did:

- Added professional and peer tutors.
- Made our Learning Support Centers more welcoming.
- Spread the word that Learning Support isn't just for students who are in trouble.
- Emphasized that the services are free.
- Involved more faculty members in tutoring and learning support.
- Increased access to 24/7 online tutoring resources.

#### What we found:

- The number of students visiting our learning centers more than doubled from fall 2012 to fall 2013.
- A majority of students who visit the centers do so often—at least five times a semester.
- Those who visit often are much more likely to get at least a C or better in their courses.

### 2 Integrated Career and Academic Advising

We know that students are more successful if they have a distinct academic or career goal in mind. We concentrated on helping students identify career

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choices as early as possible so they could follow the proper academic paths to reach their goals.

#### What we did:

- Determined which students entering college for the first time had a clear career goal, which ones were unsure, and which ones had no goal.
- Focused intensive career exploration and advising efforts on the unsure and unclear.
- Visited college-preparation classes for 2,000 incoming students to share career aptitude tools.

#### What we found:

- About a third of the first-time college students entered without a clear career goal.
- It takes several advising sessions to help move most students to a definitive career path.
- Those who have identified a career goal are more successful and return for the next semester at a higher rate.

### 3 Improved New Student Orientation

We were concerned that many of our first-time college students—especially those who were not college-ready in some academic areas—needed more information, resources, and tools than they were getting in our online orientation.

#### What we did:

- Replaced the online orientation with a face-to-face orientation for some students.
- Assigned students whose test scores showed they were not yet ready for college classes to the face-to-face orientation.

- Required an intensive advising session for each student assigned to the face-to-face New Student Orientation prior to the orientation session.
- Assigned advisers to make personal contact with the New Student Orientation students during the first weeks of class to assess how classes were going and offer resources and support.

#### What we found:

- The combination of intensive advising and the face-to-face orientation helped better prepare students.
- Students assigned to the face-to-face orientation remained enrolled in 92 percent of their classes, about the same as those who were not required to do the orientation because they were better prepared.
- Almost 90 percent of those who attended the New Student Orientation said it prepared them for their first semester in college.

### 4 Set Up Early Alert System and Student Coaching

By the midpoint of the semester, it may be too late to help a struggling student recover. We wanted to be sure we could quickly get to students who needed help getting back on track.

#### What we did:

- Set up an easy-to-use system in which faculty can alert an adviser when a student starts to struggle in class.
- Trained faculty teaching almost 1,000 courses—most for new or underprepared students—to use the system.
- Established a network of student coaches and mentors to intervene with students when an alert is triggered.



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## LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP ■■■

### What we found:

- Students who received early alerts were most successful when they also took advantage of other resources, such as the out-of-class support.
- Students who worked with the advisers after receiving an alert were highly likely to stay enrolled.

### 5 Enhanced the My Learning Plan Tool

Once students have a degree goal in mind, it's imperative that they have a plan to get there. We wanted students to have a tool for up-to-the-minute guidance on where they stand in meeting graduation requirements. We also wanted them to have a clear visual understanding of how decisions such as dropping a class or changing majors could impact them.

### What we did:

- Developed an online tool—My Learning Plan—that allows students to map out their courses several terms in advance.
- Explained how to use My Learning Plan during orientation and worked directly with first-time college students enrolled in the college-success course many underprepared students take to complete a plan.
- Made the tool available to every student in the online student portal.



- Promoted the My Learning Plan tool to all students.

### What we found:

- My Learning Plan shows students the consequences of some decisions, such as dropping a class or changing a major.

- Students who completed the plan had a significantly higher success rate than those who did not.

### Results So Far

#### All First-Time College Students

For the third consecutive semester, SPC has made significant gains in the success rates of its first-time college students.

Students who entered in fall 2013 successfully completed 74.4 percent of their courses, compared with 69.4 percent in fall 2012. (Success in a course is defined as a student completing the course with an A, B, or C grade.)

#### First-Time, Minority College Students

The success rate among all African-American students rose from 58.9 percent to 67 percent between fall 2012 and fall 2013. The success rate of Hispanic students also increased by a similar proportion.

The results for first-time, African-American male college students are especially encouraging, a sign that the achievement gap between our African-American students and white students is narrowing.

The African-American male students who began at SPC in August 2013 were successful in 65 percent of their classes. By comparison, the success rate for the African-American males who began in August 2012 was 51.2 percent.

#### First-Time College Students in Developmental Courses

Students whose test scores or high school performance indicate they are not ready for college-level work also benefited from the College Experience efforts.

Success rates for all first-time college students who needed developmental education courses increased from 65.3 percent in fall 2012 to 70.2 percent in fall 2013.

*BILL LAW is president of St. Petersburg College in Florida.*