Pellissippi State Community College Sees Positive Results with Proactive Advising Model – January 2017

In the summer of 2015, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission awarded the Advising Center at Pellissippi State Community College (PSCC) the Tennessee Promise Forward grant to implement a new project to support Tennessee Promise students. The program combined proactive advising with the use of text messaging as an innovative method for communicating with students.

As the name suggests, proactive advising strategies seek to reduce student dropout by having academic advisors proactively reach out and initiate contacts with students as opposed to passively waiting for students to come to an advising appointment. Within PSCC’s proactive advising model, academic advisors intentionally interact with their caseload of advisees throughout their entire time at the institution. Advisors facilitate face-to-face meetings and provide relevant information to students as needed. To make communicating with students more effective, academic advisors utilize Signal Vine, a two-way texting platform that allows advisors to send and receive text messages from their computer.

PSCC’s academic advisors hoped to increase the number of contacts that TN Promise students had with advisors, especially during their first semester when they are most vulnerable and likely to drop out. According to Christian Lockhart, one of the co-authors of the initial grant proposal, the goal was to “better utilize the time between the end of one registration period and the beginning of the next to provide information to students and encourage academic planning.”
Approximately three weeks into first fall semester, advisors began meeting with students. These appointments had two purposes. First, advisors sought to develop an advisor-advisee relationship in which the student felt comfortable coming to the advisor when he or she had questions or concerns.

Second, advisors provided students with relevant information based both on the timing of the appointments and the student’s unique needs. Appointments early in the semester focused on preventing students from dropping out of the institution. Using open-ended questions and active listening skills, advisors gathered information and provided referrals to appropriate campus resources. Appointments later in the semester focused on intervention and/or academic planning depending on the student’s progress and courses.

Throughout these appointments, PSCC used Signal Vine to provide additional information, schedule appointments, send reminders of important dates, and give students a convenient platform for asking their advisor specific questions. During the spring semester, advisors continued to conduct appointments. For students that did not do well in their fall courses, as indicated by their semester GPA, advisors prioritized them and saw them earlier in the semester. Beyond spring, students contacted and met with their respective advisor at their discretion. “The hope,” explained Lockhart, “was that these students would have developed rapport and comfort with their advisor and would reach out when they need help without the advisor having to be intrusive.”

The results of the program have been very encouraging. As of April 2017, the 1,223 TN Promise students included on Signal Vine had sent a collective 6,734 texts. Furthermore, these students visited the Advising Center a total of 1,013 times during the two-month period between the end of fall 2015 registration and the beginning of spring 2016 registration. This accounted for approximately 38% of the student visits during that time from a group of students that comprised only about 12% of the total student population that semester. “These students are reporting that meeting with their advisor more frequently and having the ability to text their advisor is not only encouraging them to engage in academic planning but also that it is helping them get better grades and return each semester,” explained Lockhart.

The Advising Center reapplied for the TN Promise Forward grant in 2016 and successfully had their funding renewed. As a result, they have been able to continue the program with the 2016 cohort of TN Promise and are currently implementing it with the 2017 cohort.

For more information about the PSCC’s Proactive Advising Model, please contact Christian Lockhart at cslockhart@pstcc.edu or PSCC Director of Advising Services, Rachael Cragle at rccragle@pstcc.edu.

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