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An evaluation study of a college success course as a counseling intervention

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ABSTRACT

Community colleges are attracting many first generation minority students. A question often asked is how can a college, faculty, and staff promote student achievement, particularly to underrepresented groups? One of the courses required at a South Texas community college, serving a predominately Hispanic population, is a College Success Course. Courses such as these are designed to facilitate students in developing the necessary skills/attitudes to succeed in college. The study explored the perceptions of counselors and students regarding the effectiveness of a College Success Course as a counseling intervention and as it related to improved student skills and achievement.

The study included a between-group research design utilizing mixed methods. Personal interviews were conducted with six counselors who taught the College Success Course. The students that received the College Success Course intervention completed a personal skills survey with open-ended questions. The constant comparative method was utilized to analyze the additional qualitative data (Patton, 2002). The findings of the qualitative portion of the study indicated that the College Success Course was viewed overall by students and counselors as an effective counseling intervention to improve student success skills.

Students completed Nelson and Low's (2004) College Version Emotional Skills Assessment Process (ESAP). Descriptive statistics and a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were completed to compare the posttest ESAP scores of the intervention groups in comparison with the control groups. The ANOVA was significant in the assertion scores only. Although the quantitative statistical significance was limited, the students felt that the course was facilitating them in improving their study skills.

Keywords: Increasing success in higher education, college success course, community colleges, minorities

INTRODUCTION

Community colleges that have open door policies attract a diverse population of students with varied needs, aptitudes, interests, and goals (Haggan, 2000; Purnell & Blank, 2004). Even though entering freshmen, as well as students in general, have usually perceived themselves as being capable of obtaining their academic goals, instructors and counselors have often been aware of the gap between students' efficacy and academic performance.

A diverse population provides a multiplicity of challenges for counselors who are responsible for assisting students with personal counseling, academic preparation, career guidance, social support, information, and a variety of other services (Durodoye, Harris, & Bolden, 2000; Ray & Altekruze, 2000). Different variables have been studied to try to improve achievement rates, but few have addressed counseling services to facilitate student achievement.

One of the areas in which counselors have often played an integral role is orientation programs for entering freshmen students in colleges. Some colleges provide semester-long college orientation courses that are developed based on the specific needs of the students for a particular college (Lang-Jones, 2001). The purpose of the study was to determine the effectiveness of a College Success Course as a counseling intervention to improve student success. The perspectives of counselors and students regarding the effectiveness of the College Success Courses were explored. The study furthermore determined whether there were significant gains between the intervention and non-intervention groups scale scores on the posttest administration of an emotional intelligence instrument following the College Success Course intervention.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Community colleges are attracting many first generation minority students. According to the 2006 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), from 1999-2000, 44.7% of college age Hispanics, 53.4% of Native Alaskans, 46.9% Native Hawaiians/other Pacific Islanders, 44.4% of African Americans, and 39% of Asian Americans were attending a public 2-year institution. The percentage of students graduating from high school has increased; thus, the exigency for postsecondary education has also risen for community colleges and universities as more students graduate

Yet, despite the enrollment increases in community colleges, six years after having enrolled in college, the overall graduation rate in 2008 was 57.2% (NCES, 2010). Administrators and staff of colleges and universities have made the effort to utilize different strategies to promote student achievement and retention. Semester-long orientation courses are created to familiarize students with the services available to them on campus, as well as provide them the opportunity to get to know other students and faculty and staff of the college (Derby & Smith, 2004). More importantly, freshmen seminar courses, as well as remedial education courses, continue to be the bridge for students who are academically requiring additional support for college level coursework (Vaughan, 2005). Limited research exists on how specific courses impact college attrition (Lang-Jones, 2002; Vela, 2003).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to determine the impact of a College Success Course as a counseling intervention on student success. Students who have not scored at college level on college placement tests are required to take a College Success Course, in addition to remedial courses, in order to promote success and achievement and thus retention. On the other hand, while other students have the necessary academic entrance scores on their college placement exams, they may still encounter academic difficulties after their first semester in college. One of the interventions that counselors recommend to these students, as well as a part of their academic probation contract, is enrolling in a College Success Course. Yet, does this intervention work? Are students' skills improving after enrolling in a College Success Course? What impact does a College Success Course as a counseling intervention have on student success?

In order to answer these questions, the study explored the perceptions of counselors and students regarding the effectiveness of a College Success Course as a counseling intervention as related to student success. The study furthermore determined whether there were significant gains between the intervention and non-intervention groups scale scores on the posttest administration of an emotional intelligence instrument following the College Success Course intervention. The primary difference in both of the groups was that one group received the College Success Course intervention while the other group did not. Additionally, the students in the intervention group were in College Success Courses taught by counselor instructors only, and the students in the non-intervention group were in college level courses taught by full-time faculty.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Nationwide, community colleges serve over 11 million students on an annual basis (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). An estimated 1,655 community colleges exist to provide students in the United States with the necessary educational and training opportunities to bridge the gap to further educational careers and economic prospects. However, challenges continue to impact community colleges (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). While enrollments at community colleges continue to rise each year, students are having difficulty completing their programs of study (Derby & Smith, 2004). . Minority students, overall, continue to be underrepresented in terms of educational achievement, as opposed to their Non-Hispanic White counterparts (Benitez & DeAro, 2004). As a result, community colleges have been often identified as “revolving door” establishments (Derby & Smith, 2004, p. 763).

Various theoretical models of college attrition have been developed by several researchers in order to try to identify the variables that influence students to leave or stay in college (Spady, Tinto, Bean & Metzner cited in Summers, 2003). The findings indicated that students, however, leave college for a combination of reasons. The most common reason for students to drop-out was believed to be for academic difficulties. Summers (2003), however, has asserted that additional factors, such as registering late for classes, poor academic performance, having a full-time job, confusion regarding educational goals, and not utilizing campus resources, have also been found to lead to high attrition rates.

Community colleges attract students from varied family backgrounds, socio-economic status groups, academic abilities, as well as levels of motivation (Medsker & Tillery, 1971; Richardson, 1972). Community colleges, therefore, have a variety of students with different

needs. Some are *non-traditional* students, meaning they are older, while also having some background in the workforce, as compared to the *traditional* students who are going to college straight from high school (Healy & Reilly, 1989; U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

According to Ray & Altekruze (2000), community college students tend to be comprised of predominately single parents who are female, minorities, and in their late 20s. Furthermore, many of these students who attend colleges are first generation college students; thus, they have parents who did not attend college and they represent at least 27 percent of all graduating high school students (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004).

Many of the students enrolled in community college are often not academically prepared for college coursework. According to McCabe (cited in Byrd & MacDonald, 2005), “In a national study of community college education, 41 percent of entering community college students and 29 percent of all entering college students are under prepared in at least one of the basic skills of reading, writing, and math” (p. 1). These students thus require some form of developmental coursework in order to get them academically prepared. Remedial programs for high school graduates are the norm in community colleges (Benitez & DeAro, 2004). The aforementioned characteristics indicate that community college students grapple with issues beyond those of traditional students (Haggan, 2000).

The purpose of orientation is to facilitate students in making the transition from high school to the college of their choice. Orientation courses can vary from one hour courses for a couple of weeks that are non-credit to three hour courses, for credit, and that are the length of a regular college course (Lang-Jones, 2002; O’Banion, 1972; Purnell & Blank, 2004). Orientation sessions provide students with the opportunity to learn more about a variety of services available to them on campus such as student organizations, activities, and campus resources

Administrators and staff of colleges and universities have made the effort to utilize different strategies to promote student achievement and retention. Research regarding emotional intelligence has indicated that emotional intelligence is a more accurate predictor of scholastic success as well as occupational success as compared to traditional Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests (Goleman, 1995; Nelson & Low, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The study explored the perceptions of students and counselors regarding the effectiveness of a College Success Course as a counseling intervention as related to achievement and evaluated whether the course improved student skills. The students in the control group were selected from classes of students at the college that agreed to participate in the study. Students enrolled in a College Success Course taught by counselors completed Nelson and Low’s (2004) College Version Emotional Skills Assessment Process (ESAP) in the beginning of the semester as well as towards the completion of the semester. A control group of students who did not receive the intervention and were enrolled in college level courses also completed the ESAP in the beginning of the semester and towards the completion of the semester. Descriptive statistics were utilized to compare differences between the groups utilizing SPSS 13.0 version software. The intervention and control group were found to be comparable in age, ethnicity, and college classification. A total of 231 students from the intervention and control group completed the initial ESAP and descriptive statistics were obtained from such data. The largest percentage of students in both groups, 17.6%, were 19 years of age. The participants in the control group were

comprised of 93.8% Hispanics, 4.5% White Non-Hispanic, and 1.8% Other. The intervention group was comprised of 94.5% Hispanics, 2.7% White Non-Hispanic, and 2.7% as Other.

Information was gathered from interviews with counselors and students at a South Texas College as well as from the completion the ESAP College Version (2004) by the students during the fall, 2007 semester. The ESAP College Version (2004) is a self-assessment instrument with a total of 104 items. Each item has its own independent response. The responses for each item include statements such as most descriptive, sometimes descriptive, and least descriptive, which are scored 2, 1, or 0 respectively (Nelson, Low, & Vela, 2003).

The study utilized a between-group design utilizing mixed methodology. The quantitative data were obtained from students who received the College Success Course intervention and the control group that did not receive the intervention and completed the ESAP College Version (2004) assessment. A pretest and a posttest administration of the instrument were provided to students in order to determine if significant differences existed between the intervention group and the control group following the College Success Course. Descriptive statistics were obtained to compare preexisting differences between the groups utilizing SPSS 13.0 version software.

Face-to-face interviews were completed with each of the six counselors in their particular offices at the college where they were employed. Counselors selected for interviews were all the counselors who taught the College Success Course as a part of their responsibilities at the college. An interview guide was utilized during each of the interviews. The participants responded to all of the open-ended questions. The researcher audiotape recorded the interviews with the participants consent. An audiotape recording of the interviews provided the researcher with the ability to review the tapes as often as needed in order to accurately transcribe the data. The interview method for data collection was utilized in order to obtain the perceptions, thoughts, and opinions of counselors and students regarding the effectiveness of a College Success Course as a counseling intervention.

Qualitative data were also obtained from surveys completed by students. Students completed the narrative surveys in their College Success Courses during the last few weeks of the 2007 semester. Students voluntarily responded to the open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of the course.

RESULTS

The findings of the qualitative portion of the study indicated that the College Success Course was viewed by counselors and students to be an effective intervention to promote student success. Students and counselors viewed the course as a worthwhile intervention to improve students' study skills. Some of the study skills that students identified in the course as being most beneficial included the following: time management, note-taking, awareness of campus resources, career exploration, learning style, and goal-setting. Students overall viewed having a counselor as an instructor as beneficial since they felt counselors, while being professionals and effective instructors, were also approachable as related to different issues students might want to discuss, whether academic related or dealing with personal issues.

The recurrent theme counselors articulated in teaching the College Success Course was that it served as an approach to facilitate making a difference as related to assisting students in achieving their goals. While teaching was viewed as part of the role of being counselors, there was some uncertainty as to whether teaching the College Success Course should be a responsibility of being a counselor.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was completed to evaluate whether any differences existed between the control and the experimental group after the intervention. The results of the ANOVA indicated that the College Success Course intervention was significant in the assertion skills area. A posttest ANOVA was also completed in order to determine whether there were any significant differences between the intervention and control group and total emotional intelligence ESAP skill scores. Based on the ESAP results, students in both the intervention group and the non-intervention group assessed their emotional intelligence skills at an average level of development. Even though the intervention groups' mean was large in comparison to the control group, the difference was not large enough to be significant. The findings regarding the level of commitment students had to complete a program of study from both the intervention group and the control group indicated that students from both groups had a high level of commitment to graduate.

SIGNIFICANCE

Community colleges that have open door policies continue to attract students from different socio-economic status groups, family backgrounds, as well as academic aptitudes (Haggan, 2000; Medsker & Tillery, 1971; Purnell & Blank, 2004; Richardson, 1972). Community college enrollments at minority serving institutions have continued to grow and administrators for such institutions have started to focus on how to better assist these students (Benitez & DeAro, 2004; Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005).

In line with the literature, the students who participated in the current study predominately identified themselves as being Hispanic. Freshmen seminar courses and developmental courses have long attempted to be that bridge for students in transitioning to college when they require additional academic support (Lang-Jones, 2002; Vaughan, 2005). Based on interview and survey data collected from this study, counselors and students felt that the College Success Course was a beneficial intervention.

While their total emotional intelligence skills scores on the ESAP indicated progress, the change was not statistically significant. Further research remains to be completed to determine whether any significant changes occur after an emotional intelligence intervention is provided for a more extensive time period with a larger sample size.

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