Minority Recruitment and Retention
Executive Summary – revised December 2015

The National CTC recently reviewed a number of community college recruitment and retention programs, studies, and reports. This document attempts to distill the highlights of that material into a single "best practices" overview.

When it comes to recruitment and retention strategies, a few common themes emerge:

1. There is **no quick fix, one-size-fits-all solution**. Plans must be customized to address a school's unique needs. There can be a temptation to rush to adopt the best practices of a neighbor, but what works for one school may not work for another. It's essential to understand your school's situation.

2. Successful programs require a **significant investment of time and money**.

3. Institutional buy-in is essential. One faculty member cannot do it alone. The **entire organization must work together**. The goals of recruitment, retention, and completion must be embedded into the fabric of the institution.

4. Rather than a single solution, schools often **employ a number of programs and strategies that address different facets** of the recruitment and retention problem.

5. Data is important. Schools need numbers to not only inform them about what programs are working, but to also communicate strategy to others. All **programs need to be somehow measureable** so they can be assessed and prioritized.

6. **Students need personal attention**. Too many recruitment and retention programs are impersonal – mass emails and generic resources. More effective are strategies that seek to cater to the specific interests and needs of each individual student.

Of the many documents we've reviewed, the following five are the most comprehensive. These may be worth reviewing to learn more specifics about programs and strategies that work.

CSSIA's "Summary of Best Practices for Recruitment and Retention of Students of Color"
http://www.cssia.org/pdf/20000004-ASummaryofBestPracticesforRecruitmentandRetentionofStudentsofColor.pdf

Gulf Coast Community College's "Community College Retention and Recruitment of At Risk Students"
http://www.isac.org/dotAsset/cacfb883-117c-48ac-8af0-abea7feb6a58.pdf

IWITTS' "CalWomen Tech Project Recruitment Results and Strategies"
http://www.iwitts.org/projects/calwomentech-project/recruitment-strategies#recruitmentstrategyhighlights

AACC's "The Completion Agenda: A Call to Action"
http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/Reports/Documents/CompletionAgenda_report.pdf

CCSSE's "A Matter of Degrees: Promising Practices for Community College Student Success"
https://www.ccsse.org/docs/Matter_of_Degrees.pdf

To help organize best practices, we'll use part of a list provided by the AACC's "The Completion Agenda" report.

Although they're often lumped together, recruitment strategies (attracting students to enroll in your program) are often different than retention strategies (making sure enrolled students ultimately complete). So we're splitting our list below into two categories.

RECRUITING

1. Enhance instructional programs – This focuses on improving the classroom experience and program format to better recruit students. This can include:

* Shortening the time to degree completion.

* Tailoring curriculum to meet the needs of local industry so that the skills students learn will get them jobs. This could even include getting explicit industry/employer endorsements to make the program more attractive to students.

* Enhancing concurrent/dual enrollment programs and guided career explorations for high school students. Find opportunities for high school students to get the "college experience."

* Designing schedules and formats to meet the unique needs of students, whether that's offering night classes, providing extra lab times for students who need extra attention, offering evening child care, holding sessions on-site at a location away from campus, or allowing technical classes to be taken at the same time as general education classes.

2. Enhance external engagement practices – This covers interactions with stakeholders outside your campus, whether with K-12 schools, with other universities, with students and families, or with business and industry. This can include:

* Extending the geography of usual recruiting area to pursue minority students. That is, recruit students in non-traditional environments beyond high school visits or college fairs. Go where the students and their families are – churches, festivals, sporting events. Get into the community and meet the population where they feel most comfortable. Some schools hire minority outreach coordinators. One school bought a 40-foot trailer and parked it at high school football game parking lots – prospective students and their families could meet current students, advisers, financial aid counselors and register right there on-site.

* Making the curriculum relevant. Use hands-on demonstrations and lab activities with K-12 students to deepen understanding and create excitement in specific subject areas.

* Developing early outreach in public K-12 schools. Strong relationships between community colleges and high schools are essential, whether to unify standards between institutions or communicate career options to students. Some schools create classes that give community college students a chance to mentor younger students, others offer summer STEM camps. Programs like this can demystify college for the younger students.

* Expanding your recruiting pool. Don't just focus on high school students, but look also at ABE and GED students.

* Developing articulation agreements to ensure a seamless transition to four-year schools.

* Engaging the student's family. In many cases, you're not just recruiting the student. Understand the cultural attitudes you'll be facing – sometimes, education decisions are made by the whole family and not just the student. Prepare handouts for the parents. Connect the welfare of the family to the success of the student. Convene special open-house events for the student families. Understand that parents with little or no college experience don't understand the opportunities and can put their children's future at risk. Conversely, some parents who didn't go to college may have a preference for four-year schools without realizing graduates of two-year schools have just as many opportunities.

* Connecting better with the student. The recruitment approach needs to be customized and personalized. It's no longer enough to just give students brochures about college – even struggling students at below-average schools know about college and how to get in. You have to take the extra steps. Understand the student – where is he coming from? and where is he going? Learn the student's culture and lifestyle – will they have to take the bus to school? will they be working a full-time job while going to school? do they have children? In addition, recognize the difference between what appeals to male students and female students. It's not always the same.

* Creating an advisory council comprised of minority community leaders. Give them a role in the program.

* Telling success stories. Let everyone know your program works. Make it attractive.

* Making it easy to register for classes at recruitment events. Don't just pass out brochures and make small talk. Have a laptop handy for students to sign up for classes on the spot. One school hosted a late-night pizza registration party.

* Evaluating your marketing efforts. Ask current students (via one-on-one conversations, surveys, focus groups) what appealed to them about the school. How did hear about the the program? Why did they enroll? What do they like? What do they not like? Use the responses to fine-tune your recruitment strategies. And remember to differentiate your approach; recruiting tools that work for under-21 students will not work for over-21 students.

* Getting creative with the recruiting strategy. Look for "wow" factors that will draw prospective students. Use social media and smartphone apps to interact with students and their families. Offer souvenirs and giveaways to help spread the word and deliver the marketing message.

* Contacting national (or local) professional organizations and societies. This can help promote the school's program, connect faculty with local business leaders, and make the program more appealing to prospective students. Building relationships with business and industry has many benefits, including mentoring and internships for students. Some schools organize events that not only connects students to employers, but also takes them on tours of work environments.

3. Improve student engagement - This examines ways to work directly with students to improve recruitment numbers. This could include:

* Sponsoring an informational community event that targets prospective minority students and builds awareness of the program. This could be a simple campus visit and tour, or a more involved topic-driven workshop. This event could also engage the families and raise their comfort level as mentioned in item #2

above. In addition to students meeting faculty and staff, consider also hosting an event where students can meet prospective employers.

* Understanding your target audience. One school's research suggested girls want to help society, so the school positioned its programs with that angle (one example: using the attractive "bio-medical" label to get girls' curiosity piqued in STEM career paths).

4. Enhance student services – This looks at administrative programs and strategies schools can employ to improve recruitment. This includes:

* Funding merit scholarships for minority students.

* Remembering to consider existing students when recruiting. That is, think of students in the pre-requisite or developmental classes as candidates for a specific STEM program. Schools can sometimes be so focused on external prospects that they forget about students they already have who may not be aware of all of their options.

5. Strengthen technology and research infrastructure – This refers to how classroom and administrative technology can improve recruitment. This can include:

* Using data reporting systems to sell the school's success rate to prospective students. That is, identify and track students to measure success/effectiveness of programs, which can help schools understand trends and better adjust programs and strategies. This approach can improve program performance and completion rates, which can then in turn attract more students.

* Developing surveys to learn how students are hearing about your program, which can better inform future recruitment strategies.

* Employing social media (Facebook, Twitter) to advertise your program and your recruiting events.

RETENTION

1. Enhance instructional programs – This focuses on improving the classroom experience and program format to better keep students engaged (and enrolled). This can include:

* Accelerating the pace for getting out of developmental education. No one wants to get stuck in the "bridge to nowhere" developmental classroom quicksand. The longer it takes a student to move through a developmental program, the more likely it is the student will drop out. Consider special remedial formats like those developed by IBEST in Washington (http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/e_integratedbasiceducationandskillstraining.aspx) that pairs two instructors in the same classroom, one that teaches technical content and one that teaches basic skills. Some schools provide review/prep classes before placement tests to minimize the amount of remediation students need.

* Removing the "remedial" social stigma by combining students who needed non-credit remedial classes with regular non-remedial English 101 students. Students can often do better than placement exams suggest if they realize the class they're taking is for credit.

* Supplementing technical curriculum with lessons in "soft skills." This can be special, stand-alone seminars and workshops or a plan to fold "soft skill" lessons into multiple existing classes or topics.

* Adjusting teaching styles to encourage and support minority populations. For example, females learn better when real-world context is provided for classroom exercises and when the teacher begins by first modeling the lesson before the lecture.

* Addressing curriculum "trouble spots" with additional, supplemental instruction. One school created YouTube videos and Google Docs to address specific problem topics, so students could access anywhere that additional help and explanation.

* Integrating support into classroom coursework. Rather than referring students to other offices and buildings, try to deliver what the student needs (supplemental instruction, skills development) where they spend most of their time: in the classroom.

* Developing curriculum with a self-paced, hands-on element that engages the student. This might include a gamification element.

* Introducing stackable credentials that can lead to BA degree. This is one way to give students rewards along the way; they earn certificates and feel encouraged to pursue more, all the while building to an AA or BA.

* Using the school's relationship with business and industry to make sure the knowledge, skills, and abilities they want to see in new hires are the same knowledge, skills, and abilities your program teaches. Regular meetings with business and industry groups not only inform college program curriculum, but also helps showcase the skills community college graduates bring to the industry (i.e. not every entry-level position needs a four-year Bachelor's degree).

2. Enhance faculty engagement – This looks at strategies to improve faculty skills to keep students engaged in the classroom and thus improve retention rates. These could include:

* Developing faculty and staff training to better understand the minority population.

* Making the curriculum relevant. Tie exercises and projects to specific community social issues. This can be particularly effective with female students. Use hands-on demonstrations and lab activities to deepen understanding. Set up a tour at a local facility.

* Accepting the digital divide. Millennials have "hypertext minds" that leap around. This contradicts the linear and orderly traditional lecture model. More and more, today's students learn through discovery. They're indifferent to time and place. This mindset, coupled with Millennials' pervasive use of technology, can create tension among faculty. Find ways to bridge the gap between those who welcome the on-line/digital culture and those who resist it. Linked to this, address the very real frustration some faculty (and some older, more traditional students who may be sitting side by side with your Millennials) feel about classroom technology, whether it's caused by all of the training, by the lack of support, or by the suspicion of reliability. Help increase their comfort level.

* Employing social media to communicate with students, whether pushing interesting, exciting content or simply communicating assignment details. This might require teaching faculty how to effectively use those tools.

* Flipping the classroom to provide more in-class help for learning. Record the canned lectures on video so students can hear those at home.

* Exposing faculty to real-world work environments with short-term externships. This gives instructors the kind of first-hand insight into best practices that can impact teaching and benefit students.

3. Improve student engagement - This examines ways to work directly with students to improve retention numbers. A lack of student engagement is often key to the retention problem. So the more actively engaged students are (with staff, with faculty, with peers, with the material), the more likely they are to stay in the program and achieve their goals. This engagement could include:

* Providing clear role models. This could mean asking current minority students or alumni (e.g. "near-peer" panels) to speak to classes or attend college fairs, getting minority faculty and staff involved in mentoring, hanging posters on the walls showing images of minority professionals at work, using current college students to serve as summer camp counselors, or asking career women to talk to middle schoolers about STEM jobs.

* Leveraging school and faculty relationships with professional organizations to find internships and mentors for students that can provide real-world guidance that keeps them engaged and on task.

* Trying to change self-defeating cultural outlooks. Convince students it's not weak to ask for help if you're struggling. Increase their aspirational level. Send the message to parents and students that 2-year schools expect just as much hard work and academic rigor as 4-year schools.

* Communicating where possible in the students' native language. This can demonstrate cultural respect and also sends a message of inclusivity. One school learned that videos in Spanish were far more effective than English-language videos with Spanish subtitles.

* Offering peer support. Some schools pair incoming students with older experienced students, some create in-house mentor programs that pairs students with faculty and staff.

* Creating "learning community" cohorts of students taking two or more linked classes together. Ideally, a faculty member can be involved reviewing the group's progress and helping coordinate assignments among the linked classes. Some studies suggest that members of learning communities do better academically, feel a stronger connection to the school, and use school resources/services more frequently.

4. Enhance student services – This looks at administrative programs and strategies schools can employ to improve retention and to better engage students in the classroom. This includes:

* Embracing "holistic advising." Students need more than just a single, impersonal, 30-minute meeting. The most essential element of retention is strong (and frequent) advising. Advisors should focus on student interests and incorporate those passions into class selection and finance planning. Schools should likewise recognize the culture, community, backgrounds, and experiences of students so that the curriculum can support and connect with those unique world views. In addition, students need clear "academic plans" that point the way to a degree. Advisors should not only tell students what classes to take in the short-term, but also how to best plan for academic success in the long-term.

* Implementing early warning systems that alert advisors if a student gets into trouble. The idea is to pro-actively resolve a concern before it grows into a problem. These systems works best for students not originally identified as at-risk in the enrollment process, but who later struggle. These are the kinds of students that can fall through the cracks unnoticed. Early warning systems can be triggered by difficulty with course material, a lack of motivation, a failure to do work or attend class, unexpected medical and financial problems, or substance abuse.

* Using "intrusive advising," a variation of early warning systems. Intrusive advising - which may include phone calls, newsletters, and signed contracts - is designed to intervene if a student is in danger of dropping out. Advisors get actively involved in a student's life and develop a personal stake in the students' success. This hands-on approach takes a student's individual needs into consideration and tries to match those needs with

specific interventions and services. The student can sense this customized, attentive approach, which can foster feelings of import and inclusion. For this to work, however, advisors must be thoroughly familiar with campus services and programs and policies (as well as the people who run those services and programs and policies) so they can make referrals. Advisors also need open, flexible schedules so they're readily available to meet with students.

* Creating special programs to help new students transition from high school to college, developing both academic and non-academic (college survival) skills. This can be a semester-long credit-bearing first-year experience class or a one-week summer bridge seminar. These programs – which some schools make mandatory – can provide early registration, orientation events (which some schools make mandatory), advisor meetings, mentor assignments, commitment pledges, peer networking, campus tours, academic presentations, field trips, and informal faculty introductions. One school provides a unique incentive: students who go through the program and maintain academic success get free tuition for six credits in a future semester (while this program is intended for first-generation students, it attracts students outside of that segment). Another school has implemented a sophomore orientation to address the drop-out rate of first-year students.

* Training front-line staff to do a better job of counseling and advising, especially with regard to degree audits and tracking. Advisors (and faculty) should also articulate clearly the differences between available employment opportunities and salary with and without the certificate or degree.

* Establishing an on-campus minority organization to foster diversity/cultural awareness.

* Creating an on-campus learning assistance center to provide students with a venue for expert coursework help.

* Making advising mandatory for developmental students. Some schools also require peer mentoring and tutoring for developmental students, but this can get very expensive.

* Minimizing late registration. Students who register late are at a disadvantage to their peers who attend the first day of class. Yet many schools with a "no late registration" policy still allow students to register late or enforce the policy inconsistently. One possible solution: offer late-start classes that allow late registrations.

* Developing a comprehensive, well-staffed, on-campus tutoring center and encouraging students to use it regularly. One school supplements traditional coursework tutors with special workshops that teaches study skills like organizing, note-taking, and test-prepping.

* Employing student program evaluations to better understand what's working and why, then using the results to improve your processes and content. It may also be worthwhile to consider surveying students' parents. Some schools also ask students to do a self-evaluation to rate how much they've learned (i.e. they rate where were when they started and also rate where they ended up).

5. Strengthen technology and research infrastructure – This refers to how classroom and administrative technology can improve retention. This can include:

* Developing data reporting systems to identify and track students and measure success/effectiveness of programs. This can help schools understand trends to better adjust programs and strategies. The CCSE surveys faculty as well to see how their perceptions on school programs and practices connect (or don't) with student perceptions.

* Using technology to track degree progress so students (and advisors) can easily understand where they are at any given time in the degree/certificate pathway.

* Considering special digital advising tools to help with retention. One vendor called csMentor starts checking in with students in the last semester of high school. Each week, csMentor sends weekly "MIP"s (Mentoring Interactive Programs) which are 3- to 5-minute videos followed by quiz that cover topics like bonding with teacher or coping with separation. The MIPs address four areas of student development: health, social adjustment, academic performance, and academic intention. The MIP results go to the student and family once a week and helps identify possible areas in need of improvement. The goal is to identify and resolve a problem before it becomes a crisis.

6. Build a "culture of completion" – This involves getting students, faculty, and staff all invested and actively involved in pursuing the goal of completion. Everyone is part of the solution. Everyone has a role in successful retention. This includes:

* Creating an internal retention and completion steering/advisory committee – which ideally would span multiple departments – to promote the culture of completion and to develop an organizational strategic plan to that end. This can mean developing a new position dedicated to completion strategies (which can be very expensive) or reorganizing existing faculty and staff duties.

* Using professional development events (for staff and administrators as well as faculty) to both promote the value of student persistence and retention and teach strategies to boost persistence and retention.

* Defining clearly for all stakeholders what "completion" means for the school. How do you define it and why is it important? This can help build accountability and ownership of the solution. This includes using the language of completion with students.

* Making completion a clear institutional priority. Student success is often highest when retention efforts are coordinated by a centralized office or person, making the effort visible and giving it a sense of import. Schools that don't even have a retention and completion steering committee, for example, are sending the signal that it's not a priority.

* Realigning resources to induce students to participate in those programs that can lead to completion.

* Setting a high bar for students. Students often do their best when expectations are high. Create a high standard, but be sure to provide the infrastructure support needed to attain that standard.