UPDATE ACTION PROJECT - Resources for Graduate and Undergraduate Students

1. Describe the past year’s accomplishments and the current status of this Action Project.

Undergraduate Programs

Undergraduate Academic Advising Summit in May 2012 identified key areas in which improvements are needed in both faculty and professional staff advising performance and service. This was also supported in the results of the 2012 Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) which indicated a significant gap between the importance of quality advising and the level of satisfaction of students surveyed.

Undergraduate student attrition data collected in 2011-12 indicated a higher proportion of students leaving CUC for financial (24%) than academic (18%) reasons which clarified some anecdotal assumptions about retention. Trends were tracked for overall undergrad population, the 2011-12 Freshman, transfer and First Generation students.

An Academic Recovery Plan/Contract was developed and implemented in Spring 2012 for students on academic probation, those failing to maintain satisfactory academic progress. This included mandatory services through the Academic Center for Excellence (ACE), Student Life (peer mentoring), counseling referrals. Students were also required to secure the signature of their faculty advisor as well in order to facilitate consultation and further support. A post-Fall census (Sept 21, 2012) review of academic standing for these students is underway to determine effectiveness and next steps.

The Committee for Student Success (CSS) was recast into the “Early Warning ‘Huddle’” group, its membership based on the “need to know” level of access to student issues. Membership includes representation by Residence Life, Undergraduate Academic Advising, Office of Multi-Cultural Engagement (OMSE), Academic Center for Excellence (ACE), athletic department, Academic Early Warning System administrator, Student Financial Assistance, the Assistant VP/Academics-Student Success and the Dean of Students (chair). Meetings were increased to twice-weekly; Academic Early Warning System notices from faculty members were reviewed with appropriate interventions for students with multiple reports as well as referrals from other sources. The Huddle met weekly through the summer months to monitor and stay in contact with students regarding re-enrollment progress and concerns which appeared to obstacles to reenrollment to CUC for the Fall 2012 semester.

Strategic Enrollment Plan (SEP) Action Plans were updated and disseminated to the VPs of appropriate units. These include Academics, Student Life, Enrollment Management and Marketing, Administration/IT and Development for delegation to appropriate individuals/offices within those units.

In the Spring of 2012, undergraduate academic departments created summer communication plans in order to stay in touch with students in each major. These utilized web pages, e-newsletters and social networking sites with the assistance of the Marketing office so as to be consistent with standards for official university communication.
College of Graduate and Innovative Programs

Resources for doctoral graduate students are being addressed by newly designated “doctoral faculty” who receive academic load weight reduction to support comprehensive examinations, and doctoral dissertation committee work. Seventeen doctoral faculty members have been identified and provide assistance to doctoral candidates to achieve a level of scholarly research and inquiry to complete doctoral program requirements. Doctoral students in the online program also have access to the “Collegial Cloud,” which is a virtual resource for 671 doctoral students and faculty. The Cloud, was launched in March, 2012 and contains research resources, forms, articles, web links, comics, writing tips, dissertation support websites, recommended books for navigating the dissertation process, and announcements from the Division of Doctoral Programs and Research. This division was established in the Spring, 2012.

Master and doctoral level courses in the various 46 separate, credit and degree programs in the College of Graduate and Innovative Programs have been continuously improved by including more online tutorials for student and instructor access. These tutorials range from APA support, to Blackboard navigation, to setting up and attending virtual classroom meeting. Technology is in place to provide online, web access for dissertation defenses for doctoral students, and to provide training for remote and part-time faculty working with our doctoral students. A new Communication Center to address these issues is in constant use.

2. Describe how the institution involved people in work on this Action Project.

Undergraduate Programs

The Committee on Student Success Early Warning “Huddle” group, Office of Undergraduate Advising, the Strategic Enrollment Planning Implementation Team (I-Team), and five Vice Presidents (VP for Student Life and Leadership Services, Enrollment and Marketing, Academics, Development and Planning and Research) worked together to develop new resources and programs for the undergraduate students. The various committees, task groups and units are composed of faculty and staff that many times do not get to work with one another. Key faculty and staff personnel were identified based on their interaction with students and knowledge of Concordia’s challenges. For example, the SEP I-Team includes three full-time faculty members, five Vice Presidents, two Assistant Vice Presidents and two full-time professional staff people. Representation from these different areas was intentional but also focused on bringing in senior administrators who are in a position to both elicit and delegate ideas for support programs for students.

Graduate and Innovative Programs

The Department of Instruction Design and Technology (IDT) provides support for faculty training and online course design. Subject matter experts in each graduate department works collaboratively with the IDT department to address our technology projects. Each department continuously assesses the efficacy of each graduate course online, and makes needed adjustments according to student needs and feedback. Faculty members are on course design teams, based on student enrollment and scheduling needs. Program development teams are also in place, as the College experiences increased growth in new initiatives and innovative development.
3. Describe your planned next steps for this Action Project.

Undergraduate Programs

Over the course of the 2011-12 academic year, a number of factors changed that shifted some of the responsibility of the SEP I-Team to other task groups and campus units. Of significant impact was the creation of the position of full-time Director of Institutional Research (as a result of our additional AQIP Action Project: Data Driven Decision-Making) which has brought data gathering and dissemination/interpretation into one central office. Gathering of data required for the SEP process over the previous eighteen months was accomplished in a less efficient manner. As a next step, this change will allow better assessment of student needs and attitudes via standard surveys (SSI, NSSE) in both instructional and non-instructional programs and processes. In academics, this office is also spearheading an initiative to create a cohesive assessment plan for the General Education courses across the three undergraduate colleges. Progress in the latter will appear as a new AQIP Action Project.

Further, better data on undergraduate student attrition has allowed for identifying campus demographic groups, e.g., student athletes, First Generation students, commuters, for specific interventions that will support them in their academics and engagement with student campus life.

Graduate and Innovative Programs

Assessment development, data analysis, and program improvement are some of the next steps for this project. Data has been collected as a result of NCATE accreditation in the graduate certification projects and will be continuously reviewed as it impacts standards alignment through all course delivery modes, including fully online and hybrid courses.

Faculty will work to acquire student feedback to formatively assess needs for learning effectively, and meeting course objectives. Areas such as standards alignment of course objectives and activities, rubric/assessment development, and quality threaded discussions in online courses will be examined.
4. Describe any “effective practice(s)” that resulted from your work on this Action Project.

Undergraduate Programs

Week to week reporting undergraduate student attrition across a number of categories was developed over the course of AY 2011-12. As a refinement of previous tracking of re-enrollment of continuing students, an additional weekly report was developed which continued through the first “Add/Drop” week of the Fall 2012 semester. This enabled better prediction of enrollment revenue as well as program capacity.

Instructors of introductory freshman courses are now required to post a running grade percentage and to provide syllabus and other course outline documents on Blackboard. The intent is to further promote student ownership of their academic progress and to reduce the number of Academic Early Warning System notices from faculty. The use of Blackboard in this way will be extended to all undergraduate courses through the next year. Support and orientation for faculty members new to Blackboard was provided prior to the start of the academic year and is available as online tutorials as well as face to face consultation with Instructional Technology personnel.

Students are now also appraised of the option to “stop out” of their studies rather than simply withdrawing completely. Under CUC policy, a student who stops out and temporarily discontinues their education for financial or other reasons may resume their studies within two semesters without going through the admission process again. Stop out students also meet with the Office of Undergraduate Advising and are referred to specific courses in their program that, if taken singly at community college or online, will help them to move their degree program along even by small increments during their inactive status. We also actively recruit/invite these students back prior to their declared term of re-entry through contacts with Student Life, Academic Advising and a personal letter from the Sr. Vice President for Academics.

Graduate and Innovative Programs

Effective practices in online course development have resulted in quality course templates which insure academic rigor, standards alignment, and consistent online pedagogy regardless of instructor. These templates are examined systemically through departments and IDT so that quality curriculum, instruction, and assessment techniques reflect “effective practice.”

The practice of requiring ALL online faculty members to complete university developed online certification requirements has also been an “effective practice” which insures technical and pedagogical training consistency.

5. What challenges, if any, are you still facing in regards to this Action Project?

Undergraduate Programs

We continue to lose significant numbers of undergraduate students in the freshman year at the lower end of the scale of academic qualification with which there also tends to be a relationship to family income and resources. While we intentionally recruit students from the immediate Chicago area, many of these students are coming from homes in the lower economic strata, a situation exacerbated
by current regional and national economic conditions. Where student success interventions are concerned, the financial status of student and family tends to supersede any other category of risk into which they may fall.

While we are ahead of 2010-11 in knowing the reasons for it, Freshman Fall to Fall retention has remained virtually flat from 2011 to 2012 at 62.5%. While finances are certainly a part of this, we continue to add support services for underprepared students as well as to strengthen and focus instructional and non-instructional student success interventions. Overall tiers of Academic preparedness measured by Noel-Levitz Enrollment Management Revenue System and ACT/Compass first year placement (mathematics) and diagnostic (English/writing) test information are first-line measures upon which resources for pre-enrollment skill programs as well as developmental courses can be based. The process for timely response to incoming freshman cohorts will need to be embedded in staffing, budget and program development which run parallel to the predisposing data that we can collect on students upon enrollment/tuition deposits in advance of the start of an academic year. Further, non-instructional support and engagement of students can be similarly linked to incoming student populations from point of deposit through the end of the first year of enrollment.

Graduate and Innovative Programs

Challenges to determine the developmental readiness of graduate students to online learning remain. Students come to our online programs with limited experience (if any) in online learning. Adult learning requires some flexibility, which is difficult to accommodate with online pedagogy; therefore, each student still needs to accept responsibilities in level of difficulty not only for the content, but for the course delivery. Continuing assessing appropriate resources and their uses needs to be on going. Access and support for faculty and student usage and interpretation of data needs to be addressed more consistently and regularly across all online graduate programs.