

Recommendations for Title V Grant Proposal West Los Angeles College

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Introduction

Like many urban community colleges, West Los Angeles College serves a high percentage of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds as well as a high percentage of minority students. According to institutional officials, about half the college's students are African-American, about a quarter are Latino, and about forty percent have family incomes at or near the poverty level. As a consequence, West Los Angeles College is eligible for many forms of federal assistance to develop and enhance its services for low-income, first generation, and minority college students. The college already has a Title III grant as well as several TRIO Programs. It also has EOPS and other such funding from the State of California.

At least one major source of this funding, however, is about to expire. The institution is in the final stages of a Title III grant from the U.S. Department of Education. College officials have now decided to follow up and expand Title III activities by attempting to secure a Title V grant. To this end, the college has retained a consultant to help develop and secure Title V funding. The Title V consultant recommended that an expert in the field of developmental education be brought to campus to consult in the development of the grant proposal.

For this purpose, Dr. Hunter R. Boylan, Director of the National Center for Developmental Education at Appalachian State University was retained to make a site visit and consult with administrators and faculty of West Los Angeles College. This site visit took place on Thursday, October 23, 2003. In addition to meeting with faculty and administrators, the consultant also reviewed college publications, data on student performance, and a rough outline of the Title V proposal. The following section of this report includes recommendations for activities that might be included in the final Title V proposal.

Recommendations

Strengthening coordination of services

Research in the field is consistent in reporting that strong coordination of courses and services is a key to effective retention programs for underprepared college students (Roueche & Snow, 1977; Kiemig, 1983; Boylan, 2002). Fortunately, the Title V guidelines allow funding to hire a program director as well as an activity coordinator. This will provide for strong coordination of the activities supported under the Title V grant.

In addition to coordinating Title V activities, this funding should also be used to increase coordination among existing courses and services serving Hispanic and other underprepared populations. Examples of areas where increased coordination and collaboration would be beneficial include

- ESL courses,
- assessment, placement, and counseling activities,

- ❑ developmental mathematics and English courses,
- ❑ learning laboratories, and
- ❑ other learning support services.

Representatives from all these areas should be selected to serve as an advising and coordinating body for these activities. This body should meet regularly during each semester to seek ways of increasing collaboration among these areas, to promote communication, and to identify and remove barriers to student retention.

Strengthening mathematics instruction

A major barrier to the success of Hispanic and other underprepared students are the mathematics courses at West Los Angeles College. According to institutional data, only 17.6% of those who place into the lowest level developmental mathematics course successfully complete the college level mathematics course within two years. In fact, 61.3% of these students do not pass any mathematics course at all within two years. Increasing pass rates in developmental and curriculum mathematics courses would, therefore, contribute to improving retention.

It is recommended that Title V funding be used to strengthen developmental mathematics instruction at West Los Angeles College. Some examples of how this might be accomplished include the following.

- ❑ Hire a coordinator for developmental mathematics courses. This coordinator should provide mentoring, oversight, coordination, and training to all faculty (full-time and adjunct) who teach developmental mathematics courses. Because this coordinator

should be highly trained in developmental education, it is recommended that whoever is hired be sent to the Kellogg Institute for the Training and Certification of Developmental Educators or some similar training program to develop his or her expertise in developmental education.

- Emphasize faculty development for mathematics instructors. Research indicates that providing training to those teaching developmental courses increases the pass rates in those courses and contributes to short-term retention (Cassazza & Silverman, 1996; Boylan, Bliss, & Bonham, 1997; McCabe, 2000). All faculty teaching developmental mathematics courses should participate in regular and systematic professional development activities throughout the academic year. They should also be held accountable for integrating the concepts and techniques learned through professional development activities into their own instruction. Particular attention should be paid to the training of adjunct faculty who, in reality, teach most sections of developmental mathematics.

- Use Video-based Supplemental Instruction (Martin & Arendale, 1994) to support developmental mathematics courses. Video-based Supplemental Instruction (VSI) supports instruction by placing “SI leaders” in each class who attend class meetings and hold supplemental learning sessions outside of class. The use of this technique has proven to increase passing rates and retention for students in courses with high failure rates (Ramirez, 1997).

Reduce Class Sizes in Developmental Courses

The class limits for developmental mathematics courses at West Los Angeles College are unacceptably high. The national average for enrollment in community college developmental courses is 25 students for mathematics and 20 for English (Shultz, 2000). According to the instructors interviewed, the average size for developmental courses at West Los Angeles College ranges from 60 to 70 students in mathematics and 35 to 40 students in English. Admittedly, these figures decline during the semester owing to students dropping out or never

appearing in class. In spite of this attrition, however, class sizes of 50 in developmental mathematics and 30 in developmental English are not uncommon. Although there is no known "ideal" class size for developmental courses, the numbers at West Los Angeles College still appear to be too high. The National Council of Teachers of English (1987), for instance, recommends that developmental writing classes be limited to fifteen students. Furthermore, research indicates that there is a clear relationship between small class size and improved student performance in basic writing courses (Sheridan-Rabideau & Brossell, 1995). To the extent possible, Title V funds should be used to reduce class size or provide better support for developmental courses.

Expand entry counseling and monitoring for Hispanic students

The assessment, advisement, and placement process at West Los Angeles College represents a highly sophisticated model. The fact that proctors meet with students and explain the assessment and placement process prior to testing, that an orientation is provided immediately following testing, and that students meet with counselors immediately following orientation to select courses is an excellent example of the state of the art in academic advising. Unfortunately, there are very few counselors involved in this process and their "case load" is overwhelming.

Adding counselors to expand orientation and advising time for Hispanic or other underprepared students would provide more opportunities for "face to face" contact. This, in turn, would provide better grounding for these students in

the rewards, behaviors, and expectations of academe. This is important because low income and first generation college students often lack an understanding of how college works and how they are expected to behave in the academic environment (Sedlacek, 1986; Anderson, 2000; Boylan, Sutton, & Anderson, 2003).

The additional counselors recommended here might also be used to expand monitoring and intervention for probationary students. At present, college officials report that there are 2300 students on probation at West Los Angeles College. Many of those on probation are Hispanic students. Additional counselors would ease what appears to be an overwhelming case load for counselors and allow them to provide more in depth intervention for Hispanic students who are at risk.

Survey students regarding assessment, orientation, and placement

As good as the assessment, orientation, and placement system is at West Los Angeles College, it can still benefit from gathering more information from the students who participate in it. This information may then be used to refine and improve the total process.

It is recommended that Title V funding be used to support an annual survey of a random sample of students who have participated in the assessment, orientation, and placement process. This survey should be conducted at the end of the first semester. It should be designed to determine:

- what students thought they heard during the process

- what students learned from the process;
- what students considered to be the strong and weak points of the process, and
- how the process shaped their attitudes toward West Los Angeles College.

Data from such a survey should be shared with appropriate counseling personnel and these individuals should meet each year to identify and implement revisions to improve the counseling, advisement, and placement process. The data collected for this should be used only for formative purposes. In other words, it should only be used for program improvement purposes, not for summative evaluation purposes.

Provide a computer laboratory for developmental English

Interviews with developmental English instructors suggest that there are an insufficient number of computers available for developmental students to engage in composition activities using word processing. These instructors believe, and the consultant concurs, that increased opportunities to use word processing for writing assignments would encourage students to write more and to edit their work more carefully.

One solution to this problem would be to provide a computer laboratory dedicated to use for English composition classes. This should not only improve students' performance in developmental English classes but it should also contribute to developing computer literacy skills among the very students who are least likely to have these skills.

Improve integration of classrooms and laboratories

Although there are some instructional laboratories available to developmental students, their impact could be improved by increasing the degree to which these are integrated with classes. The integration of classrooms and laboratories can contribute to improved pass rates in developmental courses (Keimig, 1983; Boylan, Bliss, & Bonham, 1997; Boylan, 2002).

Integrating classrooms and laboratories involves:

- ❑ having instructors and laboratory personnel meet to identify courses goals and objectives and identifying laboratory activities to support these goals and objectives,
- ❑ requiring students to use laboratories on a consistent basis as an integral part of course activities,
- ❑ grading students on their participation in laboratories, and
- ❑ having instructors and laboratory personnel meet regularly to refine and improve the connections between classroom and laboratory activities.

It is recommended, therefore, that Title V funds be used to promote this sort of integration of classrooms and laboratories, particularly those supporting Hispanic students.

Develop learning communities

The use of learning communities has been found to be particularly effective in improving the academic performance of underprepared students (McCabe & Day, 1998; Tinto, 1996; Tinto, 1998). The simplest model of learning communities simply involves pairing of two courses (such as a reading and a mathematics course) for a cohort of students who take both courses

simultaneously. More complex models involve providing a full battery of courses grouped around common themes taught by instructors who meet regularly to insure that critical concepts are reinforced in each course. Among the keys to successful learning communities are:

- ❑ careful preplanning of course activities by those teaching courses in the learning community,
- ❑ pre-course screening of those students who will participate in learning communities,
- ❑ regular and ongoing communication between the instructors of all learning community courses,
- ❑ early training of students who participate in learning communities in the rules, procedures, and expectations of the community, and
- ❑ extra-curricular provision of social, cultural, or recreational activities designed to support the learning communities (Adams & Honeycutt, 2000).

It is recommended that Title V funds be used to develop and sustain a variety of learning communities for Hispanic and other underprepared students at West Los Angeles College.

Promote the use of alternative teaching methods in basic skills courses

A basic maxim in developmental education is that diverse students require diverse teaching methods. West Los Angeles College has a **very** diverse student body. Because it was not possible to observe classroom instruction during this visit, the consultant was unable to determine the extent to which West Los Angeles College faculty use a variety of instructional techniques. However, as

Grubb (1998) points out, diversity in instructional methods is relatively rare among community college faculty.

The use of diverse instructional techniques is particularly important to developmental students (Cross, 1976; McCabe, 2000; Boylan, 2002). Yet many developmental instructors fail to use these techniques in their classrooms (Grubb, 1999). It is recommended, therefore, that Title V funds be used to promote and enhance instructional development, particularly for those teaching developmental courses. Examples of techniques that might be promoted include:

- ❑ active learning,
- ❑ computer assisted instruction,
- ❑ group projects,
- ❑ classroom assessment, and
- ❑ individualized instruction.

The Title V grant might even be used to set up an instructional development institute for faculty teaching Hispanic and other underprepared students. This institute might work with faculty to identify their needs for instructional development and then develop and coordinate workshops, discussion groups, conference attendance, and other faculty development activities.

Provide freshmen seminars/student success courses

As noted earlier, many first generation college students are totally unfamiliar with the rules, expectations, procedures, and behaviors expected in

academic settings. Furthermore, a large number of the Hispanic students attending West Los Angeles College are first generation students. Courses emphasizing orientation to college, matriculation procedures, personal development, wellness, personal management, critical thinking, problem solving, and study strategies can contribute to the success of these students (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Higbee & Dwinell, 1998; McCabe, 2000).

It is recommended, therefore, that the Title V grant proposal provide for the establishment of a one or two credit course for first year students. This course should be required for incoming students identified as "high risk" and for all those students on probation. Typically, such courses are team taught by a combination of faculty, staff, and students who are given stipends, release time, or travel money in return for their services.

Conclusion

Institutional data suggests that there is substantial room for improvement in the way developmental courses and services are organized and delivered. Success rates in developmental mathematics and English are well below national averages (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996). Almost 25% of the college's students are on probation. Persistence rates lag behind most other colleges in the district. Graduation and transfer rates for Hispanic students are low.

The college faculty interviewed claim that much of this is due to a decline in the skill levels of entering students as well as students' apparent ignorance of

appropriate academic behaviors. The available anecdotal evidence suggests that these claims are probably true to some degree. Furthermore, similar anecdotal evidence is provided by faculty at practically every college or university the consultant visits. In the view of most college and university faculty at non-selective institutions, student performance is weak today because the students we admit today are weaker than those admitted in the past. Whether or not this perception is true is largely irrelevant. College professors have to teach the students they actually have in their classes, not the students they wish they had (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995).

Fortunately, a vast body of research on improving student performance has been published in the past two decades. Regardless of our students' current level of entry skills, we have models, techniques, and tools available to improve those skills. The possibility of obtaining a Title V grant presents an opportunity for faculty and staff of West Los Angeles College to improve learning by improving teaching. This is indeed fortunate because it is highly unlikely that learning will be improved at the college through the entry of a vastly increased number of qualified, prepared, and motivated students at any point in the near future.

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