

Joliet Junior College, IL

Project: Faculty Initiative to Improve Retention, Persistence and Completion at JJC

Version 1.0- Project

Q: What is the current status of your project?
A: Completed

Q: Please indicate the original project start date, original project end date, and anticipated completion date if project is not completed. Please list dates on separate lines.
A: Start Date: October 1, 2015 End Date: June 30, 2017

Q: Briefly describe the current status of the project. Explain how this project relates to any strategic initiatives or challenges described in the institution's most recent or soon-to-be submitted systems portfolio, if applicable.
<p>A: This project was developed after participation by a Joliet Junior College (JJC) team in the October 29 – 31, 2014 Workshop on Student Persistence and Completion hosted by the Higher Learning Commission in St. Charles, Illinois. <i>Completing College</i>, by Dr. Vincent Tinto, served as a guiding narrative on issues relating to student persistence and completion. After participating in the workshop, and focusing on the theories and practices of student persistence and completion, our team decided to make an effort to determine factors influencing, both positively and negatively, the ability of students to persist and complete at Joliet Junior College.</p> <p>While a number of persistence and retention factors are generally applicable to all community colleges, the team was interested in gathering JJC specific information from our students. The project used student focus groups, conducted by JJC faculty members, designed to elicit information concerning two issues identified in an institutional assessment - the poor perception of the college by the community at large and lower than desired retention, persistence, and completion results. We decided to use student "focus groups" to ascertain qualitative information directly from our students. Such a method enabled students to provide in depth comments and explanations. Two faculty members developed a set of questions to form the basis of discussions. The questions were designed to elicit a number of key pieces of information, primarily:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student perceptions of the College both prior to enrollment and after attending the college, and what led students to these perceptions. • Student perceptions regarding what had assisted them in meeting their particular college goals. • Student perceptions on their level of student engagement at the College and factors promoting or interfering with engagement. • Student perceptions regarding their barriers to success at the College. • Student perceptions regarding their level of knowledge or awareness of degree completion requirements, pathways, course and program selection, and academic advising. <p>As of this date, thirty-five (35) individual focus group sessions have been conducted and the data analyzed. The data collection action project is being closed and a new action project will be launched to design and implement activities/improvements based on what we've learned from the focus groups.</p>

Q: List the project goals as stated in the original project declaration along with the metrics/measures for assessing the progress for each goal.
<p>A: The overall goal is to improve student retention, persistence, and completion at JJC. The original project goal was to "improve the ability of JJC students to identify their individual goals and to effectively persist in reaching those goals." However, this was further refined to focus on the specific issues that JJC students say affect their enrollment and engagement.</p> <p>The action project leaders measured student's attitudes and perceptions of the college and its services. Students were also asked to provide suggestions for improvement.</p> <p>Having completed the data collection and analysis phase, the college is ending this project and will begin a second action project to design and implement strategies to address the issues identified.</p>

Q: Describe what has been accomplished with this project over the past year, specifically referring to quantifiable results that show progress. You may need to include a discussion clarifying how the original goals and anticipated outcomes may have shifted during the year.
<p>A: The project team conducted thirty-five (35) focus group sessions between October 2015 and June 2017. The focus groups included as few as four (4) students and as many as thirty (30), with an average number of about 10 to 14. Groups were selected from both main campus and Romeoville location, day and evening classes, actual class session, clubs, and ad hoc groups gathered by faculty. Examples include clubs such as AWEN, the Intersarsity Fellowship, Business Club, and Criminal Justice Club, and classes in Psych, English, EEAS, Counseling 101, Business Law, and Honors Biology.</p> <p>It is important to note that responses from students in all focus groups were generally consistent. Responses did not vary substantially from campus to campus or group to group. It is also important to note that students were consistently eager to participate and comment. It was apparent that students appreciated the fact that the College was soliciting their opinions. Students were assured that their comments and concerns would be appreciated by and articulated to College leaders.</p>

Student's perceptions seem to be related to their level of knowledge about the college, its programs, and faculty. The more students know, the more positive their perception. Students indicated having a generally negative view of JJC prior to enrollment, many suggesting it was not their first choice for higher education. However, students who actually do attend JJC generally have a strong positive attitude toward the College, especially regarding the classroom experience. Students comment positively upon both faculty and course content, indicating they feel they are getting a good quality education. A number of students, especially during summer sessions, reported that they are attending, or have attended, a university prior to taking JJC classes. These students consistently compare JJC classes and faculty favorably to their university experiences.

A poor perception seems to stem from inaccurate information and a lack of awareness of the nature and quality of the JJC educational experience. Although some students indicated that high schools teachers and counselors encouraged attending JJC, many report that these same individuals conveyed a negative impression of the College, often suggesting that the student could do better by attending another college or university.

Those students who indicated a positive perception had some things in common. Most indicated they had some familiarity with the College, often indicating that their positive perception resulted from having a parent, sibling or close friend attend JJC. These students reported hearing positive comments about the college from those who actually attended JJC.

In addition, prospective students who had had a meaningful visit to the College seemed to have a better perception. This was confirmed by discussions with high school students attending recent Business Department Career Day Events on campus. Students brought by high schools to the campus participated in "breakout" seminars on careers conducted by faculty members and then met with groups of current students. Students also took a campus tour conducted by faculty.

In contrast to negative perceptions prior to attending the College, once enrolled and attending classes students have a nearly unanimous positive attitude toward the College. While admittedly having some specific complaints, only a small number of students expressed an overall negative perception of the College once attending as a student.

Students consistently commented positively on their experiences in the classroom and their interactions with faculty members. This classroom experience was by far the most commented upon factor leading to positive impressions. Many students commented favorably upon getting to know several students well in each class through the process of the faculty member breaking them into small groups, either for "ice-breakers" on the first day or in discussion groups throughout the semester. It is in these sessions that student, all of who commute to campus and many of who have other commitments, get an opportunity to engage with other students. Those connections lead to both social interaction as well as mutual academic support.

Many students report that they just do not have time to participate in college activities such as clubs or attendance at sporting/entertainment events. A few students suggested that more activities, including club meetings, should be scheduled in the morning to accommodate those students who leave campus in the early afternoon for work or family commitments.

Of special interest is the consistent response of students attending JJC after having attended a larger college or university. These students were quite vocal in stating the positive features of JJC, often commenting on the small class size, friendly and engaged faculty, and the high quality of academics.

It is clear from the focus groups that students in general are not aware of the nature and purpose of "academic advising" offered by faculty members. Some students also reported concerns about the appropriateness of information obtained from admissions, registration, and counseling offices regarding programs or courses. The strongest negative comments about JJC came from students who took classes not applicable to their degree choice. (This was an issue specific to students interested in becoming accountants. Students may enroll in the AAS accounting degree however; they should be enrolled in an Associate of Arts degree with a business/accounting "major.")

Students prefer direct communication from faculty in the classroom with regard to significant dates, events, and procedures. We asked students to describe the best way to communicate with them regarding important College information. The consensus was brief announcements from faculty in the classroom are most effective. Students appreciate faculty who remind them about important dates, up-coming events/activities, speakers on campus, and so on. The next most cited method was use of "text." Students report in general that email is not an effective method of communication and that they do not notice bulletin boards and signs.

When asked why fellow students leave college without completing, students suggested a variety of factors, which included:

- Students were not prepared for the academic rigor of college when they arrived from high school.
- Financial stress was a major factor.
- Lack of interest in college.
- Do not see a benefit from staying in college when they can get an immediate job.
- Many students expressed frustrations with class cancellations that disrupt their academic plans.

Describe how various members of the learning community have participated in this action project. Show the breadth of involvement by individuals and groups over Q: the project's duration, particularly during the past year.

A: By design, this project was conducted primarily by JJC faculty. Full time and adjunct faculty participated in scheduling and conducting the focus groups. The academic vice president, director of academic effectiveness, and the Program Improvement Committee (PIC) have been monitoring progress of the project. PIC includes individuals from all divisions and levels across the college. The President and her cabinet have identified retention as a college priority for the upcoming year.

Describe the effect that this project has had on the institution, students, and others in the learning community. What has the institution learned that can be identified Q: as a good practice to use in other aspects of its quality work or from which other institutions might benefit?

A: The faculty leading the action project realized very quickly that they could learn a lot about students and the college through the focus groups. That information was summarized in the previous section. They also compiled suggestions for use by the new action project team as it defines and implements strategies for improvement. A summary of these suggestions follows.

- Develop strategies to increase the awareness of prospective students, underlying high schools, and the community regarding JJC’s academic environment. Suggestions include:
 - Increase knowledge of JJC by high school counselors and faculty through direct connections with JJC faculty so that they have a better appreciation of the quality of our faculty, as well as the value of a JJC education.
 - Using current and former students as “ambassadors” to visit their respective high schools to promote the College.
 - Having current students participate in on-campus sessions with prospective students. A model for this is the Business Department “Career Day” program where students tour the campus and participate in workshops with faculty and current students. Students attending these sessions report significantly increased positive attitude toward the College and more willingness to attend JJC. We need to have prospective students meet faculty and students in addition to admission staff.
 - Develop Counseling 101 as a dual credit course for the purposes of (1) better preparing students for College and (2) increasing a positive perception of the College as our course materials are used to prepare students for college.
 - Increase Early Enrollment where high school students take JJC classes on our campus taught by our faculty.
 - Expand the concept of focus group data collection to include groups of potential students and parents.
 - Publicize to the general community the results of the focus group and subsequent efforts by the college. This will demonstrate the college’s commitment to student success and possibly influence public perception of the College.

- Develop strategies to increase faculty engagement with students. Engagement is especially important at a “commuter” school such as JJC. This process is going to necessitate some cultural change in faculty attitudes toward their role and responsibilities at the College. Suggestions include:
 - Professional development sessions as well as departmental efforts to reinforce to our faculty the important role their engagement with students plays in student success. Some sessions have already been piloted where several faculty gave “best practice” presentations.
 - Have all Department Chairs and Union Leaders share the information obtained from the Focus Groups and participate in a second stage of developing strategies to implement quality improvement efforts. It is essential that Faculty Leadership be aware of this effort and have input in moving forward.
 - Faculty leadership, including department chairs and union leaders, must drive this effort. During recent faculty contract negotiations, faculty and administrative representatives agreed on several items designed to promote faculty engagement including an increase of faculty time commitment on campus and increased faculty participation in retention and persistence efforts.
 - Increase efforts to make adjunct faculty more aware of the importance of engagement in student success. Department chairs could introduce the new Adjuncts to their role in student engagement. Sessions are being piloted at events such as the Adjunct Dinner and the Adjunct Seminars to reinforce the need for student engagement.
 - Develop a model of providing important college information to students on a regular basis in the classroom by the faculty member. This will require an effort to show faculty the need/benefit for this and to prevent it from becoming burdensome or disruptive in the class. At a minimum, faculty need to promote registration dates, tuition due dates/purges, and the need to obtain academic advising.

- Develop better strategies for “pro-active” or “intrusive” academic advising. Suggestions include:
 - Advisers reaching out directly to students to offer advising on a regular basis.
 - Better informing students at the time of registration of the importance of advising.
 - Promoting better interaction between faculty advisers and counselors to increase awareness of advising.
 - Include academic advising information on all course syllabi.
 - Promote more evening advising sessions.
 - Informing all adjuncts of the nature and importance of academic advising.
 - Faculty discuss advising needs in class.

- Continue efforts to improve academic programming.
 - Provide clear pathways/program requirements so that students do not experience confusion over course selection and degree requirements. This ties directly with Academic Advising.
 - Review the results of implementing hybrid and 8-week course models to determine impact on retention and completion.
 - Continue scheduling efforts to avoid class cancellations that cause havoc for students.

Q: Describe the anticipated challenges that may be encountered in successfully completing the project or for institutionalizing the learning from the project’s goals.

A: As previously mentioned, some cultural change in faculty regarding their role and responsibilities will be necessary. Recent faculty contract negotiations included an increase of faculty time commitment on campus and increased faculty participation in retention and persistence efforts. This has paved the way for implementing strategies to address the issues identified in the focus groups.

The suggestions also go beyond the faculty and will require collaboration across the college with recruiting and marketing, admissions and registration, and counseling and advising. The entire college community will need to recognize that the suggestions in this report are not personal or programmatic criticisms but opportunities to improved retention, persistence, and completion for students at JJC

Q: In light of the project goals, current circumstances, institutional learning from this project, and anticipated barriers to success, list the next steps to be taken over the course of the next 12 - 24 months in order to complete or institutionalize the results of this action project. Provide a timeline for completing each next step.

A: This action project was limited to gathering data that will inform a second action project. A new action project team has been identified and is registered to attend the next HLC strategy forum where they will flesh out the new action project. To maintain momentum until then, several activities have been planned. Two administrators who attended the HLC Supporting Student Success summer workshop and faculty involved in the focus group project are leading professional development sessions and sharing information and ideas from the workshop with full-time and part-time faculty as well as department chairs and deans. Deans from academic affairs and student development will be discussing opportunities for improvement.

Q: Provide any additional information, inquiries, or concerns that the institution wishes reviewers to understand regarding this Action Project. Enter N/A if not applicable.

A: N/A

Version 1.0- Update

Q: I certify that this project is ready for review.

A: I agree.

Version 1.0- Review

Q: Please comment on anything that is omitted or incomplete in the project status, dates and summary field. Enter N/A if not applicable.

A: N/A

Q: Check for accuracy and completeness against the original Project Declaration. Are the right metrics or measures included for each goal? If not, what revisions to the metrics/measures would you suggest that the institution consider?

A: This Action Project update is accurate and complete. The correct metrics and measures are included for each goal.

Q: Has the institution acted in meaningful ways to pursue project success, making progress as anticipated in the original project declaration? If meaningful progress or project success has not been achieved, has the institution made appropriate revisions to the goals or anticipated outcomes for this project? • Are descriptions of resources, organization, concrete results, and reaching milestones included? • Make a statement of global judgment. (i.e. "The institution is making [excellent/good/satisfactory/ acceptable/slow/ casual/no] progress in this action project.").

A: JJC made excellent progress on this Action Project. The institutions reported on the appropriate goals, and fulfilled those goals.

Are the appropriate people involved sufficiently for the nature and scope of the project?

• Is there sufficient breadth of involvement?

Q: • Are the right people involved? • Emphasize the roles of those who can enhance the impact, success, or effectiveness of the project.

• Tactfully call attention to any people that appear to have been omitted or bypassed.

A: This project has sufficient breadth of involvement. The project mainly included faculty, and has been completed.

Does the institution show evidence of learning from what it did well?

Q: • Acknowledge any practice that could be replicated internally in future projects.

• Encourage the sharing of best practices with other institutions.

A: JJC used measurement and research to ask questions, determine problems, and create strategies to solve those problems. This is a process that can be replicated to solve many problems.

Q: Does the institution have a realistic understanding of what it needs to address in order to achieve progress and, ultimately, project success? Does it assess its internal and external environments, recognizing the potential forces that could hinder success? Is anything overlooked?

A: The project was completed successfully. A new project to implement this projects findings will be launched.

Q: Does the institution understand the current status of its project and know how it intends to pursue project success?

A: This project is complete.

Q: Overall, does the institution demonstrate a good faith effort in its pursuit of continuous quality improvement through this action project? Is there anything of concern that should be brought to the attention of AQIP via your mentor?

A: JJC demonstrates a good faith effort in its pursuit of continuous quality improvement through this action project. There are no concerns at this time.