Using Technology as a Tool to Fuel Momentum around Student Success at Montgomery County Community College

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Challenge

Like other round one, two and three colleges in the Achieving the Dream network, Montgomery County Community College has been intentional and focused in its student success work for nearly eight years. The College's interventions are yielding positive results in accelerating more students into college-level math and English; improving the college readiness of students in feeder high schools; increasing the persistence of new students with pedagogical improvements in gateway courses; and improving the persistence of minority men's persistence through mentoring. Montgomery's "whole-college" solutions approach to improve student success and equity was recognized in 2014 with Achieving the Dream's Leah Meyer Austin Award.

Even with these "whole-college" successes, Montgomery still has much more to do to meet the ultimate goal of accelerating credential and degree completion rates. Now nine years in with so far left to go, the College is challenged in keeping faculty and staff focused on and excited about continued reform especially with significant budget reductions and continuity issues from unfilled administrative vacancies as well as the pending retirements of 40 faculty from a recently offered early retirement incentive.

To maintain momentum, the College needs a systemic strategy that can withstand institutional change and engage faculty and students in new ways around the student success agenda. Can the new work in Integrated Planning and Advising Services (IPAS) be that accelerator and momentum builder?

Background

Much of Montgomery's momentum results from following the five founding principles for reform that anchor the work of all Achieving the Dream colleges.

Leadership of the effort is strong with the president remaining part of the "core team" and the Board of Trustees actively involved in supporting the redesign of college policy. From the start Montgomery worked to build *broad engagement* opportunities for full and part-time faculty with strategies like rotating the membership of the "core team," connecting faculty governance committee work to the student success goals, and introducing a Gateway Academy for faculty teaching the 14 identified gateway courses.

The College also has built broad engagement with external stakeholders, especially the 22 feeder school districts, college and university transfer partners, and faith-based and community-based organizations. A focus on analytics and building a *culture of evidence* is a core College strength that has anchored the work from inception. The College continues to invest in developing its "analytical ecosystem" (people, tools, training, data policies and data dissemination strategies) as a means to support momentum and to make a compelling case for continued focus on the "job to be done."

About two years ago, one of the "core team" sub groups, using some of the principles of Completion By Design, took on the redesign of processes from student inquiry to student entry and success through the semester.

Having gained broad buy-in to the concept of the re-designed process and with the strong information technology and analytical infrastructure, the College was well positioned to apply for and be awarded funding from the Gates IPAS program. Montgomery's IPAS project ties together technologies and processes from three vendors – Ellucian, Starfish and Blackboard Analytics – to integrate new educational planning tools, early alert systems and learning analytics. The ultimate goal is to create customized learning progress dashboards that empower students, faculty and advisors. Below are side-by-side graphs of the new entry process and the process with the connected technology tools.
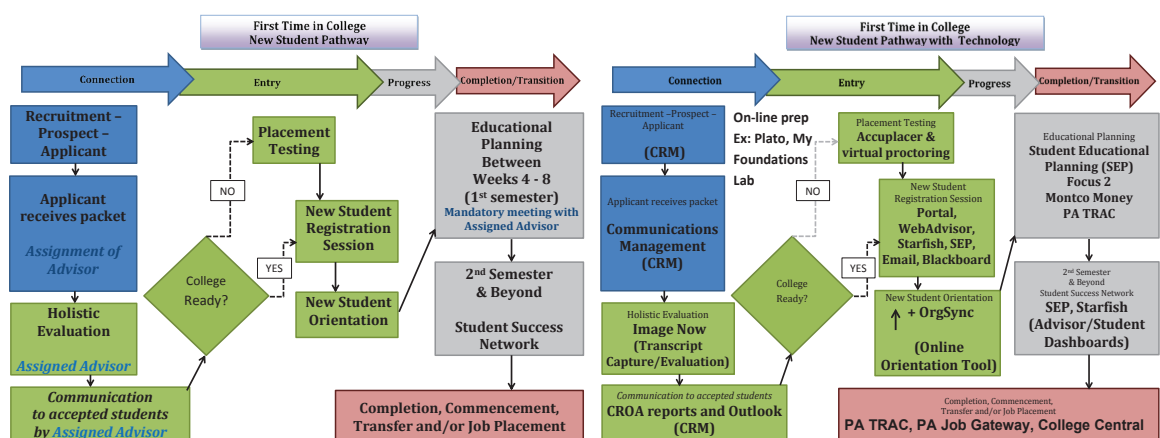
The Gates grant required the College to move swiftly, within 18 months, from design to implementation. Less than six months into implementation, the College launched Starfish to all faculty in Spring 2014. The educational planning tool was launched to students in late Fall 2014 for Spring 2015 (and beyond) educational planning. The universal use of Blackboard by faculty was achieved through recent labor conversations for Spring 2015 implementation. Advisor job description redesign, training and professional development is a core piece of that effort.

The educational planning tool is at the heart of IPAS. Successful implementation of educational planning is built on the College's "pathways" work to build stronger coherence in program core requirements, coherence of developmental education, and a data-informed use of co-requisites and pre-requisites. Program coordinators are now challenged to build two- year completion schedules to anchor the educational planning tool.

IPAS is the accelerator, the momentum builder, with the effort touching and empowering all internal stakeholders. A new partnership with Civitas will help the College build out smaller micro interventions using predictive analytics. The College is also integrating financial planning into the tool.

Results

Early results are promising. These results include:

- New first-time full-time students' enrolled in 15 credits or more increased by 13%.
- Faculty submitting mid-term progress reports average 90% compared to 73% prior to IPAS.
- Noel-Levitz: construct advising gap score 1.11 (fall 2011) .9 (fall 2014)
- Noel-Levitz: item – students are notified early in the term if doing poorly gap score 1.31 (fall 2011) .77 (fall 2014)
- Noel-Levitz: item – my academic advisor is concerned about my success gap score 1.3 (fall 2011) 1.04 (fall 2014)
- Educational planning (launched October 2014) is being used by 9,425 students
- The IPAS initiative provided opportunities for a shift in advisor responsibilities from assisting students with registration to providing proactive, intrusive advising supported by educational planning and early alert/communication tools. Early results show that this work has not yet supported this shift.
- Students indicate that they like that the advisor can help them make a plan and then they can search for available courses to block schedule that plan.
- Students indicate that they feel in control of their educational goals.

Discussion Questions

1. What fundamentals (resources, culture, tools, talent, and policies/practice) need to be in place or developed to successfully take on and implement an effort like IPAS?

2. What strategies are most useful to garner the necessary internal stakeholder buy-in to accelerate and sustain implementation?

3. How will success measured in the long term and what additional strategies and supports (including resources) might be needed to really leverage the power of the technology?