



Spring 2010

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Carmaletta (2010) "Intentional Connections = Student Success," *Many Voices - One Community*: Vol. 1: Iss. 4, Article 2.
Available at: <http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/mvoc/vol1/iss4/2>

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INTENTIONAL CONNECTIONS=STUDENT SUCCESS

by Carmaletta Williams

Executive Director for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion



Learning really does come first at Johnson County Community College. We want our students to be successful, and we have an entire community committed to making that happen. The Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (ODEI), like many divisions, departments and the campus as

a whole, has been working diligently for our students. An essential goal of JCCC and the ODEI is to recruit, retain and graduate students. Therefore, we have launched "Intentional Connections=Student Success" (IC=SS) to guide and assist our students through their educational journey. I am extremely pleased to say that a mentoring program being developed by the Learner Engagement Division has blended with Intentional Connections to create a much stronger, larger campus-wide structure and strategy for student success.

The title and function of this program, Intentional Connections = Student Success, are taken from statements made by Johnson County Community College president Dr. Terry A. Calaway, who reminds us that data shows that no matter how slight the connection to or the role of the person with whom the student connects – success results. Also, we know that students who are engaged in some way with the institution and its activities simply have a much stronger chance for success. We must, Dr. Calaway insists, make Intentional Connections with our students in order to provide them with the best learning experience possible and to guide them to academic success.

Intentional Connections addresses the holistic needs of students from their first steps on campus until they walk across the stage at graduation. We recognize that student success is predicated on more than a student's ability to pass an introductory math or reading class. Affective conditions and needs more than intellectual ability are often the barriers to student graduation. We propose to create "safe webs" around our students to help them through their educational journey. These safe webs include both faculty/staff and peer mentors, counselors, family and community connections, and any academic reinforcements they might need.

We piloted a program in the Spring 2010 semester. Twenty students were paired with mentors so that we could "test" the program. We found that students were eager to be connected with a mentor. They came to meetings and freely



shared their academic and personal information with us. They told us of their educational goals and dreams. More importantly, they were quite clear in understanding and articulating the challenges to their success.

Equally exciting was to learn that we had many more people volunteering to be mentors than we were ready to accept in this pilot program. Most insightful to me were the places from across campus from which our mentors came. Almost every department on campus, including document services and our custodial staff, had people volunteering to be mentors. I cite these two divisions because their inclusion taught me that people outside of the classroom were realizing that they had the power to help our students succeed. Their inclusion as mentors taught our campus that connections, whether in the classroom or in the lunchroom, were essential to student success.

Our first full program will include JCCC students entering in the fall of 2010. To be included in the program, students must be full-time, committed to learning and being engaged with the institution, and declare their intention to graduate from JCCC. Our Intentional Connections students will know that with successful completion of a degree from JCCC, they are able to compete on the world market with others with comparable degrees. They may not have started their educational journey on as strong a base as they perceive others have, but in the words of Abraham Lincoln, "there is no evidence that [they] may not be a better scholar, and a more successful [person] in the great struggle of life than many others, who have entered college more easily."

As students enter IC=SS, we will take individual, holistic looks at them in order to identify their strengths



intellectually, academically, emotionally, socially, physically and economically. As there are few restrictions for admission into this program, Intentional Connections students will be diverse in many arenas. Recent demographics reveal that larger communities of unserved, underserved, economically deprived, and marginalized people are moving into our area. We welcome them and will address their special needs. It is no coincidence that students in these populations have had less educational success than those in majority population, middle-class communities. Access, inclusion and equity have been denied to many of them. We will fortify their learning experiences in this program by bringing them to an understanding that they can control and chart their own futures. Their academic and affective needs will be addressed in the core structures and strategies for this program.

They, however, will not be the only students admitted to IC=SS. Students from every socio-economic group, including higher income groups, and every ethnic group, including mainstream America, are eligible for inclusion. There will be no race, age, length of residency or previous attendance requirements or restrictions. In addition to traditional high school to college students, we also anticipate that a significant number of students in this program will be non-traditional, adults who are returning to higher education for a myriad of reasons. Remarkable growth in our enrollment numbers is due to members of this cohort who are retraining themselves for expanded job possibilities.

Some of the needs of our students are certainly academic. Data gathered for JCCC's involvement with Achieving the Dream demonstrates that of the Fall 2006 cohort of 3,025 students enrolled in developmental and "Gatekeeper" courses in English and Math, only 30% of Black students, 46% of Hispanic students, 45% of Asian students and 43%

of White students persisted to one semester in the second year. The numbers are even more dismal for those who enrolled in at least one semester in each of the first three years: only 25% Asian; 15% Black; 24% Hispanic and 23% of White students persisted. What this data on persistence reveals to me is that learning and the capacity to learn, regardless of the Bell Curve or other flawed studies like Arthur Jensen's in the *Harvard Educational Review*, are not race-based. Many of the differences lie in affective regions, such as social situations, economic hardships, family conditions, and the opportunities students have had for effective learning. Ethnicity alone does not seem to be the controlling factor in these courses. Students of all ethnicities in these courses are not being successful. We must look at the student's whole learning experience and together, with the student, try to determine what is interfering with their success. We know, like in the words of Harlem Renaissance anthropologist and writer Zora Neale Hurston, "Black children don't learn by osmosis" and neither do Brown or White. So just putting them in the same spaces will not bring a cure. We need to reach our students where they are and bring them to acceptable success levels.

We also will look internally. We will take a critical look at our curriculum, pedagogy, and culture to make sure that we are providing the best possible learning experiences. In all cases, best practices for student success will be explored, created and engaged. We will provide the most successful teachers, in terms of the academic success of their former students, to teach our students. We will work extremely hard to create a campus environment where all students feel comfortable and secure enough to engage with the institution. We want our students to see themselves reflected in our curriculum and campus community; to feel respected in their classrooms and on our grounds; and to feel safe to engage completely with the institution. Their diverse needs, abilities and motivations will be taken into account in creating a strong, working strategy for student success.

We don't have a magic wand to wave to make this all happen in a minute. It will take time, but we have taken our first bold steps. Once we realized that we pretty much already have everything we need to make this program and our students succeed, we launched this program with our available resources. We realized that we have a campus community filled with people who understand the rigors of higher education. We came to learn that our faculty and staff are willing to extend helping hands and to give freely of their time and energy to advance the lives of others. We recognized that our community is committed to helping enrich students' educational journeys any way they can. We came to learn that we have a campus community that is willing to make intentional connections so our students can succeed.