Examination of Negative Indicators
University Advisement Center
California State University, Dominguez Hills

Introduction

California State University, Dominguez Hills’ commitment to increasing retention and graduation has led to the examination of undergraduate students with a negative service indicator on their student accounts. The student population was targeted to gain a greater understanding of the circumstances students face that may potentially lead to a stop out or dropout.

Materials and Methods

CSU Dominguez Hills identified 161 students whose accounts show negative service indicators (NSI) related to advising, which restrict registration. These holds were placed to ensure students developed an academic plan for the upcoming semester and have a clear path towards graduation. Students with a continued NSI status in the targeted group had one or both of the following holds:

1) STEPS Hold: Strategies Towards Educational Progress & Success, or STEPS, holds were placed after the fall semester for students who earned a cumulative or CSUDH GPA below 2.0. To lift the hold, students with a STEPS indicator must meet with an academic advisor from the University Advisement & Testing Center to establish an academic success plan to improve academic standing.

2) Advising Hold: These holds are placed by students’ academic departments for major advisement before semester registration begins. Placing the hold ensures advisors and students have the opportunity to co-create a semester plan that will lead to graduation. It should be noted that not all academic departments have adopted this practice. Currently, selected majors within College of Arts & Humanities, College of Natural & Behavioral Sciences, College of Health, Human Services & Nursing, and College of Education place holds on student accounts for advisement.

The data collected was analyzed for trends that would lead to a greater understanding of the barriers students face, thus allowing the University to improve efforts that lead to student retention and graduation. Trends that were examined include: major, academic college, fall ‘15 unit load, CSUDH and overall GPA, type of student (native, transfer, returning), and class level.

Results

Through data analysis it was found that transfer and academic probation students were in need of additional support to increase retention and graduation of these students. The data highlighted the struggle transfer students experience as they adjust to a new academic and social environment. Transfer students accounted for 65% (105) of students with an NSI, of those 70% (73) were in their first semester at CSUDH as Fall 2015 admits. The data also shows that transfer students, on average, had the lowest GPA of the native, transfer, and returning populations. This finding is significant because studies have shown the first semester GPA is the best predictor of student success and retention (DesJardins, Alshburg, & McCall, 2002).

Further Research:
To better assess the barriers and individual experiences students face at CSU Dominguez Hills, a survey was developed and sent to the targeted population. The survey is anonymous and asks students questions about demographics, employment, barriers, and experiences in multiple academic departments.

Recommendations:

Enhance Transfer Support

Students who transfer to CSU Dominguez Hills do not have a transition program to support them as they adapt to a new college environment and the expectations of a 4-year university. Their struggle is evident by the 65% of transfer students with a hold, and their average CSUDH GPA of 1.64. Research has shown that students need support, as they experience ‘transfer shock’ characterized by a drop in GPA during the first semester after transferring (Laanan, 2001). A transfer support program would allow students to benefit from the opportunity to create relationships with faculty and staff outside of the classroom, which is critical for retention (Tinto, 1984).

Expand Early Warning System

Grade performance is a predictor of persistence and educational attainment even when controlled for pre-college characteristics, socioeconomic status, institutions attended, and college experiences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). To better support student success, it is recommended that the academic probation policy be enhanced with the following two-pronged approach. First, an Academic Warning policy should be created to communicate academic resources and availability of academic advisors to support student success. Second, it is recommended an academic success contract led by major departments be implemented. By current policy and procedure, the UATC supports all undergraduate students on academic probation, regardless of class level or major. However, it is important to recognize the value of academic department involvement, as 75% of the targeted population were juniors and seniors whose focus is major related coursework.

Academic Warning: An academic warning letter will be sent to students whose current GPA is below 2.0, but CSUDH and cumulative GPA are above 2.0. Academic Warnings will not be included in students’ academic record, as the policy is intended to provide campus resources and department contact information to support students improve academic standing. A template letter has been created which may be used and modified by the major department to suit their needs.

Academic Success Contract by Major Departments: Allowing academic departments the opportunity to meet with students that are on academic probation within their major gives students and advisors the space to discuss major coursework and develop a plan of action to improve academic standing. A template Academic Success Contract has been created as a guide to discuss and set academic goals. Academic Success Self-Assessment has also been created to assist students identify factors affecting their academic performance.

References
