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Renewable Resources

Los Rios prepares to roll out updated student support services

Apr 30, 2014 By Allison Joy

Thomas Hanns Jr. was homeless when he first enrolled in classes at Sacramento City College, one of four main campuses that make up the Los Rios Community College District. Having spent the last year or so of high school relying on the kindness and couches of friends and struggling with his unstable finances, a couple of years studying at the community college level seemed to him a good way to transition into a four-year university program.

“I didn’t have any resources at the time,” he says. “I didn’t know you could get application fees waived or anything. I was 17 and alone, so I just decided it would be easiest to pick a community college, go out there and get on my own two feet.”

He moved from Yuba City into his sister's apartment in Davis and applied to Los Rios. "It was relatively simple," he continues, "all I had to do is apply online and sign up." Hanns says he wasn't aware of any available orientation program. "I didn't meet with any counselor; I just had my sister help me pick some general ed classes."

Three years, two advisors and a year's worth of unnecessary coursework later, Hanns is preparing to start classes for the Fall 2014 term at Sacramento State. The road to transfer wasn't easy. He found it difficult to schedule advising appointments, and even after meeting with an advisor, the educational plan mapped out for him didn't end up serving his needs -- hence the extra coursework.

"I met with (an advisor) and she said the classes that I had taken were not the right ones," his eyes widen in retroactive frustration as he recalls the meeting. "I literally had the paper she wrote on, saying what classes I need to take to transfer."

The piece of paper he is referring to is his educational plan, what he describes as a, "good old piece of printer paper, written on with pen, that I carried around for three years. Every time I went to a counseling appointment, I would get a new one and it would be slightly different."

Hanns encountered problems even finding an advisor. He rolls his eyes as he describes calling SCC's counseling office and leaving a message with an automated service (SCC PIO Amanda Davis was unfamiliar with the system, saying the automated service was only used recently for potential students who attended the college's "Senior Saturdays" outreach events in February and March). He says he received a message back from the school two weeks later with a scheduled appointment time two weeks out. Hanns, who at the time was working six days a week at In-and-Out Burger in Davis, found the system frustrating.

"I'm sorry, but I work and I have class," he says, throwing his hands up in the air. "I am very busy and if I have to free something up, I need some control over when that appointment is."

Overall, he says that, in his experience, the majority of student policies were punitive and that support was "essentially nonexistent."

Los Rios Associate Vice Chancellor of Student Services Victoria Rosario agrees that up until now, supportive services have not effectively served the Los Rios student body.

“(The system) was sort of random, not very intentional, and there were no consequences for not participating,” she says. “Students saw these sort of services as another hurdle, and they really didn’t understand the value of going through these procedures.”

According to data provided by the California Community College Chancellor’s Office, roughly 30 percent of California’s community college students attend school full-time, and the remaining 70 percent includes both degree and transfer-seeking students as well as non-traditional students, such as professionals seeking additional training. Between the 2005-2006 and 2011-2012 terms, the average graduation/transfer rate for degree or transfer-seeking students was less than half (49.2 percent), and currently the average time taken to earn an associates degree is between three and four years.

Things are more dismal on the national front. According to the nonprofit MDRC, a nonpartisan education and social policy research organization, only one-third of community college students graduate within five years, with a disheartening four percent earning an associates degree within two years.

But experiences like Hanns’ may be a thing of the past. As part of the Student Success Act of 2012 (SB 1456), for the fall 2014 term, community colleges throughout the state will be required to provide to students supportive services that include orientation, academic assessment and the formulation of an educational plan. New students who use the services will be offered priority registration for what are often limited class seats, and existing students will need to remain in good academic standing to retain priority privileges.

Funding will not be determined by the number of students the colleges serve, but by how well those students are supported. Whereas in the past dollars depended on a campus’ unduplicated headcount, starting next year the number of students who use supportive services will become a primary factor in the allocation of funds.

The goal is to see matriculated students completing the necessary coursework to earn their associate’s degree or transfer to a four-year university with greater ease and in a more timely fashion.

“The overhaul was to create a process that is more focused, planful and transparent,” says Rosario.

At Los Rios, the new system integrates with the current student e-services program. It offers clear, step-by-step instructions that usher new students through the process of orientation, getting their academic assessment and seeing

an advisor. Gone will be the days of crumpled printer paper and the need for in-person check-ins to ensure a student is still on track. Students can access their educational plan through the same e-services account to track progress. Advisors are able to monitor not only the services a student is using, but also those they are eligible for -- whether that be for veterans, low-income students or those that require additional tutoring -- so advisors can ensure students are connected to the appropriate resources.

In response to the inefficacy of New York's community college system, CUNY launched the supportive services-based Accelerated Study in Associate Programs at six area community colleges in 2007. ASAP offers fee waivers and additional services like free public transportation and textbooks as well as a tuition waiver. In exchange, students are required to use a number of supportive services.

They must meet with their adviser at least twice per month and a career counselor once each semester, take necessary developmental coursework early and graduate within three years.

According to the MDRC, ASAP saw its students earn 25 percent more credits than non-ASAP students and a 66-percent increase in graduation rates compared to non-ASAP students. An independent study conducted by The Center for Benefit-Cost Studies of Education at the Columbia University Teacher's College found that, despite significant additional financial resources required on the front end, ASAP graduates cost the system as much or less than graduates through the traditional approach.

Susan Scrivener served as project director for the MDRC's evaluation of ASAP. She attributes the program's success to the breadth of student services, but says the full-time requirement is essential.

"It seems like there's something central to requiring students to go full-time and then providing the rich array of services and support that ASAP students get," she says. "The approach feels holistic. It's a package of services, and it feels hard to just pull something out."

The upcoming policies to be implemented as part of California's Student Success Act may not be as comprehensive and structured as those of ASAP, but they follow the same line of thinking: Colleges can't wait on students to reach out, but instead must make support as easily accessible as possible, if not obligatory, in order to be effective.

Los Rios rolled out its online orientation on Feb. 1 of this year. Though it wasn't required, as of March 25 almost 5,000 students had completed the online

orientation in just seven weeks, compared to a total of just over 2,000 during all of the spring 2013 term.

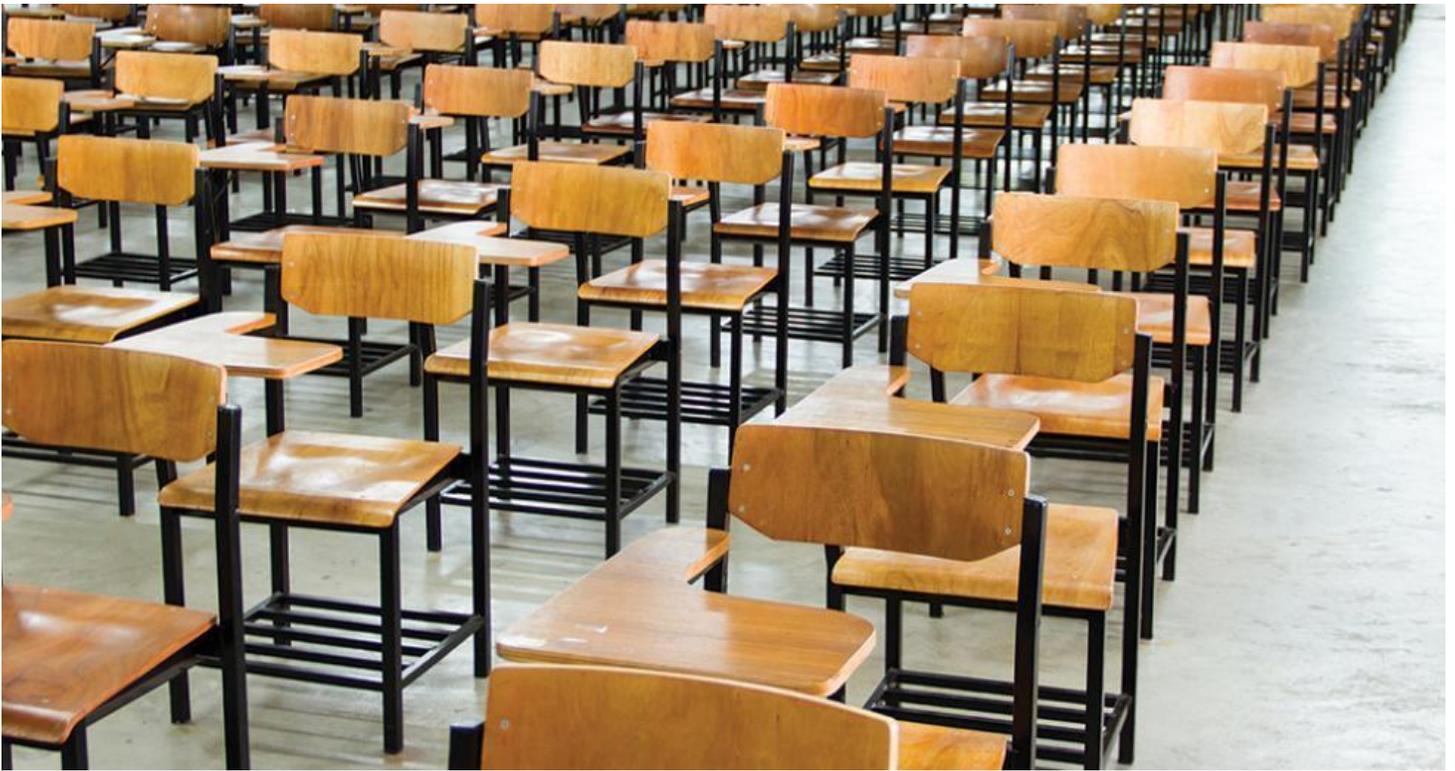
Beginning in the fall 2015 term, incoming community college students throughout California will be required to complete orientation and academic assessment as well as develop an educational plan as part of their student agreement upon admission.

The colleges will also be required to provide follow-up services to students on academic probation to prevent them from remaining on probation for a second semester and therefore losing their fee waiver.

According to Linda Michalowski, Vice Chancellor for Student Services and Special Programs at the state chancellor's office, how this requirement plays out at individual colleges will be determined by their local administrations.

Hanns was lucky. The additional classes he had taken that did not contribute toward his university transfer ended up helping him earn an associates degree -- something that wasn't part of his educational plan but which he feels will be useful in finding a new job in his desired field while continuing his studies at Sacramento State. And for new students, problems like Hanns' might be easier to avoid with greater transparency.

"A lot of research done in the last several years has shown that when students are given many choices and not given good information, they don't necessarily make the best choice," says Michalowski. "So helping students pursue a path that we know is more likely to lead to success is what we're trying to accomplish."



Student Success Update

California community colleges aim high

Update Oct 1, 2014 By Allison Joy

Last May we reported on the Los Rios Community College District's ahead-of-the-game implementation of state-mandated student supportive services ("**Renewable Resources**," May 2014). Those improved services were required by colleges statewide for the fall 2014 term as part of the 2012 Student Success Act. Now, the rest of the state is about to catch up.

On August 21st, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office and the Foundation for California Community Colleges unveiled Step: Forward, a marketing campaign and website to help students understand the requirements for priority registration upon enrollment. The program's launch came just six days before the California Community Colleges announced it would aim to

increase the number of students meeting educational goals (whether by earning a degree or by transferring to a 4-year institution) by almost 250,000 students over the next 10 incoming freshman classes.

Step: Forward focuses on three elements. After students apply for enrollment online, they are guided through a set of instructions to go through orientation, take their assessment and then create an educational plan.

The Los Rios Community College District has been working on increased supportive services for students since 2008 and had its own version of Step: Forward called Steps to Success, implemented last January.

Los Rios Vice Chancellor of Student Services Victoria Rosario says more than 17,000 students completed Los Rios' online orientation since last February, compared to 2,000 during the spring 2013 term. Between January and July of this year, around 30,000 electronic education plans were created by counselors with students, and around 20,000 students completed their assessment (compared to just under 5,000 for the spring 2013 semester).

Los Rios also now offers its Steps to Success in Spanish and plans to roll out a series of additional languages in the coming months.