

**Community College of Philadelphia
Leadership Institute**

**2008 – 2009
Project Final Report**

Timely Online Reminders and Tips for Students' Success

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An overview of the project proposals/goals

Rationale

Students at CCP juggle many responsibilities, and need constant reminders about crucial deadlines. Very often, they miss financial aid deadlines and get dropped from their classes. They forget to check their grades to see if they fulfilled the requirements to register for the next semester and sometimes get dropped from their classes just before the start of the next semester. This results in frustration as when they try to register for classes in the last minute students don't find courses they need or the schedules that match their jobs or family needs.

The information about important deadlines for registration and financial aid and other course related information is available at different sites either on the College Web or available in hard copies. However, after talking and meeting students during academic advising or classes, we find that their major concern is important information is available, but not in one single place and in a simple form that they can understand and follow. They feel that very often they have to seek information from various sources, and by the time they obtain the information and act, it becomes late and they miss deadlines. In addition, in our experience we have also found, whether it is a freshman or a continuing student, students need constant reminders, updates and explanations throughout the semester for the important deadlines that they must meet. Moreover, students themselves admitted that they don't pay attention to the information given in the catalog or the course schedule booklet. Therefore, our challenge was to explore a simple and easy path to make the students take ownership and responsibility so they will meet crucial deadlines, and take necessary actions when needed during the semester, and complete their courses successfully and avoid frustration and be an engaged and persistent student.

Goal

The major goal of the project is to provide students timely reminders and tips to successfully complete each semester without missing deadlines. These reminders and tips would be conveyed to students during important periods during a semester. The rationale for this approach is students usually get overwhelmed when too much information is thrust on them at one given time. Therefore, our approach is to convey only the information that they need during a particular period when it is critical for the students to fulfill the requirements. Such an

approach would ensure that students will definitely view these reminders/tips and take necessary actions. This will also force them to take ownership of their learning process. We decided that these tips and reminders would be done online as the majority of our student population is now technologically advanced.

Based on our experiences with academic advising and financial aid, we identified four major areas students would need our timely reminders the most:

- Financial aid
- Academic Advising/Registration
- Course information/Academic progress
- Co-curricular activities

We also identified five critical periods in a given semester that students would need reminders. These were:

- First week of classes
- Third week of classes
- Mid-term
- Final Examination
- Intersession

Project goals and leadership institute's theme of "Fostering Student Engagement and Persistence"

When students are frustrated and run around trying to figure out in the last minute what classes they could take, or find out that all their classes are dropped due to their missing deadlines, they tend to lose interest in their academic endeavors. Some decide not to take classes during that semester, or just disappear. However, if they do register in classes not of their choice, they carry this resentment throughout the semester, and it affects their performance in their classes. We believe that our project will alleviate students' frustration and improve retention. Our timely reminders will provide them information when they need it, and just the information needed during a particular time in the semester. This will ensure that they meet the required deadlines and persist in their academic goals. We feel that this will also pave the way to have more engaged students who take ownership of their responsibilities in their college life. Once this project is up and running, we feel that the staggering number of students who get dropped due to non-payment of tuition because they missed crucial financial aid deadlines, or get dropped due to not meeting the pre-requisites might be reduced.

Summary of research undertaken

a. We first looked at institutional research/reports in order to gather any data/information to ascertain whether a need for timely reminders was expressed either by the students or the College administration. To this effect, we found two sources where such a need was conveyed.

"Student Satisfaction with Student Services, Academic Services and Campus Climate" Noel Levitz Student Satisfaction Survey Results- IR report #177, July 2008

The survey results indicated that CCP students seem to be satisfied with the convenience of class schedules, but were least satisfied with the convenience of the registration process. The survey also indicated that there was room for improvement in students' experiences related to student and academic services. We felt our project may directly impact in improving in this area. If the students receive important information periodically via the MYCCP portal or e-mail, and constant reminders about registration deadlines and steps to review their academic progress, they perhaps might be more engaged and satisfied with the services at the College.

Achieving The Dream Proposal, May 14, 2007

The Priority Issue #1 , "Improve student outcomes through strengthened student support systems: Comprehensive Orientation Program and Early Alert/Intervention System" fits in with our project goals. The proposal discusses what the feedback from students revealed about what factors played a key role in students' success. Students revealed that they often find themselves confused about the registration process, and get frustrated when they are unable to get the right answers. This frustration often leads to discouragement particularly among those students who enter the college without a well laid out educational plan.

This proposal also clearly addresses what strategies will be used to address the Priority Issue #1. A significant factor that is mentioned is that the College needs to implement "multiple ways of orienting students beyond just offering a one-day event each Fall and Spring." One implementation idea would be to have an on-going orientation process right through each semester as the proposal writers firmly believe that "orientation programs are the bridge and key connector between the last stages of recruitment and the first stages of retention." We conceived our project to be one such orientation process.

b. In addition to institutional research, we also examined the following resources:

Navigating the System (packet given to New Student Orientation break out group leaders)

Our initial research of this document indicated that students were given information regarding their first week of classes, drop/add information, career website etc orally within a short period of time. Students may tend to forget this as it is a whole host of information to retain at one given time.

c. FAQs, NSO FAQs, and FAQs about Financial Aid

We examined these documents to see if relevant information can be used for our timely tips and reminders. At present, students have to go through many steps before they can access these FAQs. In addition, there is once again a long list of information conveyed to them at one given time.

After our research, we were convinced that our timely online reminders would definitely assist students to juggle their responsibilities and navigate their academic paths here at the College more smoothly and avoid frustrations.

Outline of steps

- First we wrote a generic set of reminders covering the four areas we identified. We shared this with our mentors, Ron Jackson and Jermaine Williams. They suggested a few changes and advised us to be consistent with our headings and information we include in the reminders.

- We also decided to survey the students to gain their input as to where they would prefer to receive the reminders. We constructed the survey, and with the help of IT we were able to conduct this survey online. We had about 500 students take the survey. We also did face-to-face surveys and informal interviews for about 90 students. The survey results validated our assumption that even though information exists in different places, students don't access it, and that they would prefer to obtain important information from one centralized location. The survey results also indicated that 62% of the students who responded preferred to receive important information via e-mail.
- Based on the information we got from Enrollment and Financial Aid office, we found a staggering number of students were dropped before Fall 2008 and Spring 2009 for not meeting the pre-requisites or for non payment of tuition. In Fall 2008, 430 students and in Spring 1, 202 students were dropped due to not meeting the pre-requisites. Similarly, 4,520 students in Fall 2008 and 2, 285 students in Spring 2009 were dropped due to non-payment of tuition since they did not meet the deadlines stipulated by Financial Aid. This information made us realize the grave need for our project.
- Being armed with all the necessary information, we met our mentors again in February to discuss with them how to proceed in implementing the project. We also met Mr. Jerome from IT and Dr. B. Jones from Enrollment to further discuss our project. After several meetings, at our final meeting with our mentors and Mr. Dave Watters, we realized that since many departments were involved in communicating the right information, it was essential for IT to create a submission tool which would enable different departments to submit their information. Once this is established, Mr. Dave Watters agreed to be responsible to generate the relevant information in a timely manner via e-mail to the students.

Future goals/Institutionalizing the project

- During summer we will contact the IT to see if a submission tool can be created. Once this is done, we will contact the relevant departments and request them to submit their information. We will then work with Mr. Dave Watters, Mr. Ron Jackson, and Mr. Jermaine Williams to coordinate the effort to generate the information to the students.
- We will review how the information is received by the students via another survey and focus groups.
- Once we know that the project is working and benefitting students, we will coordinate with Student Life Office to institutionalize this as an ongoing effort so students will continue to receive the timely online reminders.

Evaluation Plan for the Project

To fully evaluate the success of this project might involve data collected for at least two semesters. We hope to do the following to evaluate the success of the project:

- Compare number of students dropped for non-payment in Fall 2008, Spring 2009 with Fall 2009 and Spring 2010. If the number of students dropped is less, we can perhaps attribute it to the tips and reminders to a certain extent.
- Compare the number of students who visited Academic Advising Office during the first two weeks of the semester for Drop/Add/Registration for Fall 2008/Spring 2009 with Fall 2009/Spring 2010.
- Obtain data for the number of letters that were sent to students during the 20% and 50% attendance period during Fall 2008/Spring 2009 and Fall 2009/Spring 2010.
- Administer a students' survey during Fall 2009 and Spring 2010 to determine if students are using the tips/reminders and their feedback.
- Obtain data from IT to see how many students are using the tips/reminders.

Summary of what we learned from the Leadership Institute

Charis Felton

Our project has helped me become aware of the impassiveness that some of our students take towards their college careers. It has directed me towards the unfortunate statistics of how many students fail to continue their education after completing a semester or two. This has made me want to reach out to our students in whatever way that I can. I'm aware of the importance of receiving an education, so I have found myself chatting with students that come through the Athletic Offices about the important deadlines and dates that they need to know and directing them towards someone that can offer more assistance. This project has reminded me of when I was a student and needed similar guidance, and it has also impacted me to go beyond my daily duties to be of any help that I can.

Maryann Lyons

I think one of the things that I learned from working on our project was that nothing gets done easily at CCP. Trying to get different departments enthusiastic and engaged in new ideas can be challenging. However, on the plus side, I got to meet Girija, Charis and Leanna and work with them. Working with them made me see things from a different perspective-being in ITS for so long was kind of like being in a bubble. The LI allowed me to meet and interact with people from all different departments throughout the College which is an opportunity I'm sure I would not have otherwise. What I learned about leadership from the LI is that, although there are many different types of leaders, they all seem to have some common characteristics: passion for what they do, determination to overcome obstacles they may encounter on the path to their goals, optimism, enthusiasm that tends to be contagious, and a generally positive attitude toward people and situations in their lives. My favorite part of the LI were the speakers. They were from such diverse groups that I felt as if we got a really good look at all the components of a 'good' leader. Overall, I thought the LI was a wonderful experience and I'm really grateful that I got to participate in it this year.

Girija Nagaswami

When I applied for the Institute, I had assumed that I will be 'taught' specific leadership skills through the course of a year! However, now after completing the institute, I realize that leadership skills are not taught, but one has to discover them. So to me the greatest benefit is the process through which I have learned what it is to be a leader. Developing a project with my group members was this significant process for me. I learned the different steps one has to undertake before something can be implemented, and through this got to know the different departments of the College and how each one operates. I also learned that it is not easy to implement an idea or a project because of the several protocols that one has to adhere to.

Another valuable skill I learned is that a leader has to learn to collaborate with any group, and will not always get to work with like minded people. I am thankful to the institute for giving me an opportunity to work with Charis, Leanna, and Maryann closely. If not for the Institute, I would have never met them. Working with them on our group project gave me an opportunity to engage in an endeavor completely new to me as a faculty member. In addition to this, our luncheon discussion enabled me to work with other group members and get to know them.

Leanna Phan

I have learned and understood my strengths and weaknesses from the very first meeting I attended. The HBDI (Herrmann Brian Dominance Instrument) has helped me understand my thinking style and the thinking style of others. The Leadership Institute taught me the four tips for leadership issues; take responsibility to learn, desire to change life, commitment to your services to CCP and students, and scholar to see and learn.

I was placed in a diverse team to work on a project; every person has unique background, skills, and thinking process. Regardless of our differences, we have worked together very well to accomplish the goals of the project. The project has helped me to comprehend the responsibilities of the leader, and to see the broad picture beyond our own limited area of focus.