Proposal for Vision 2020 Grant AY3

Project Title  Disability Support Services Entering Student Engagement
Team  Jim Hasse, Anne Drake, Dennis Rodriguez, Virginia Heidemann, Michele Lentner

Abstract

The target population for the DSS Vision 2020 AY3 grant will be fall 2016 incoming DSS students. This should be approximately 60 students. While building strong college success skills is important for any incoming student, the additional challenges facing students with a disability make establishing a strong initial foundation particularly important. Existing data also clearly indicates a strong relationship between the academic success of entering students and their engagement with the DSS office. The Peer Mentoring supports student engagement with DSS and other University resources and helps to better prepare students to be successful in their first year at IU South Bend.

Goals
- Increase student awareness of college expectations.
- Increase student engagement with the services provided by the office of Disability Support Services early in the semester with follow up throughout the semester.
- Encourage new students and transfer students to engage with peer mentors.
- Increase student engagement with campus resources and opportunities for personal and academic growth.
- Increase persistence and retention for degree completion.

Assessment

Assessment of the project objectives for AY2 included the following:

- A survey administered to all fall 2014 first time students at the beginning of the spring 2015 semester.
- A comparison of DSS office engagement with first semester GPA. This will also be done at the end of the second semester.

Results

Student engagement is a key focus for DSS, and specifically of the grant activities. Student engagement is broadly defined in terms of the extent to which a student utilizes services and accommodations and/or maintains contact with the office. Because the nature of this engagement can vary depending upon the individual, we do not attempt to quantify it beyond the basic distinction of “engaged” or “not engaged”. However, we have found this to be a useful way of evaluating office effectiveness, particularly with incoming students. This is assessed each semester for the entire incoming cohort. We have consistently observed that a high GPA is associated with office engagement, while those students with low GPAs seldom follow-up after some initial contact. The challenge has been to increase the percentage of students who do continue to engage with the office. Our Vision 2020 grant
activities are intended to build and support this engagement through the summer workshop and the ongoing Peer Mentoring.

**Participation**
A total of 9 students participated in the workshop conducted on July 31, 2015. One participant eventually withdrew entirely from classes for disability-related reasons and is not included in this analysis.

**Workshop Evaluation**
Despite changing the workshop format from the previous year to just a single, one-morning workshop offered closer to the start of the fall semester, attendance was still disappointing. We reached only 15% of our total fall incoming cohort. It simply is difficult to bring this population of students together as a group.

The overall reaction to the workshop by presenters and participants was quite positive. The faculty involvement by Dr. Rodriguez and Dr. Grens was, once again, particularly valuable. Students reported finding the workshop to be useful and the nature and amount of information presented was good.

**Office Engagement, Academic Success, and Retention**
The mean first semester GPA was calculated for (1) the workshop participants, (2) all those entering students who engaged with DSS over the course of the semester, and (3) the entering students who were not engaged with the office. These mean GPAs are indicated below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Mean GPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workshop participants (n=8)</td>
<td>2.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All engaged students (n=34)</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Engaged (n=25)</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fall-spring retention for the total entering cohort is 86%. Retention for the workshop group is 100%, while retention for the non-engaged students is 82%. The fall-spring retention rate for the entire population of 325 students registered with DSS is 84%.

**Peer Mentoring Evaluation**
It is difficult to directly evaluate the impact of the Peer Mentoring, particularly since it is now strictly on-line mentoring. At this point we really have only indirect support and anecdotal feedback. Students are able to opt out of the weekly emails, but no one chose to do so. The Mentors were asked midway through the semester to request feedback from their students about the value of the weekly mentoring contacts. Although comments were positive, very few students responded. A more formal attempt to survey student perceptions will be done during the spring semester.
Important indirect support for the mentoring is the significant improvement seen in the percentage of students engaged with the office and the fall academic success of these students.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{GPA} \geq 3.0: & \quad 51\% \ (38\% \text{ for fall '}14) \\
\text{GPA} < 2.0: & \quad 15\% \ (30\% \text{ for fall '}14)
\end{align*}
\]

Fifty-eight percent (58%) of students engaged with the office compared to 48% for fall ‘14.

**First Semester Survey of First Time Entering Students**

A survey was administered to first time entering students at the beginning of the spring 2016 semester to assess office engagement and student perception of their ability to recognize and manage the impact of their disability during their first semester. Surveys are completed anonymously so it is not possible to identify results specifically for workshop and/or mentoring participants. However, the results do contribute to our understanding of student development in terms of managing the impact of a disability.

Surveys are still being collected, but based upon the 30% response rate thus far, the following results were reported.

- Eighty percent (80%) of the students felt that their disability had a moderate to major impact on their academic performance.
- Most students (80%) felt that they had a good understanding of how to manage the impact of their disability, even at the outset of the semester.
- Fifty percent (50%) of the students reported that they were comfortable or very comfortable advocating for themselves at the start of the semester. This number rose to 80% by the end of semester.
- Ninety percent (90%) of the respondents reported that they utilized DSS services (engaged) and all rated services or accommodations as being helpful or very helpful.

**Interpretation**

It can be difficult to get students to participate in activities or events that, while potentially quite beneficial, are not required or that involve doing something “extra”, like the workshop. Many students with a disability are particularly reluctant to participate in something that identifies them as having a disability. This seems to be particularly true for incoming freshmen trying to avoid any type of stigma associated with having a “disability”.

Despite condensing the workshop to a single session and conducting it later in the summer, student participation was low. For those who did attend, it seems to have been a valuable experience. With the exception of the one student who withdrew from all classes, all of the workshop participants returned for their second semester, and only one had a GPA below 2.0.

Whether engaged with the DSS office or not, the overall academic performance of this entering student cohort was high. Thirty (30) of the 59 students had a GPA of 3.0 or higher and only 9 fell below a 2.0. This is the best performing group in the eight years that the office has tracked this data. Even so, it is still clear that students who engage with the office are more represented among the highest achievers. We will continue to collect information as to the effectiveness of the Peer Mentoring, but we remain convinced that it is an effective means of reaching out to these students to
help them engage with DSS and the campus community and to develop the self-awareness and self-advocacy skills to be a successful student.

Proposed AY3 Activities

Based upon what was learned from the Year 1 and Year 2 data and our experience with the project, the following modifications are proposed to increase program effectiveness.

- We will no longer conduct the summer orientation workshop. While the content of the workshop was excellent and it seems to have been beneficial to participants, we are not reaching enough of our incoming students. Instead, we will attempt to communicate this information in a way that increases the likelihood of reaching more students. One option would be to create a page on the DSS website that includes the workshop information. This could include videos of our presenters sharing their information and insights. Another option may be to create a type of “app” experience where students can access information on a variety of topics. We are not requesting AY3 funds for this effort.

- The focus for AY3 will be to maintain and further enhance the Peer Mentoring. The Mentors will continue to be available for individual, one-to-one mentoring for students who desire it, but the primary objective will be to regularly engage a much larger number of students through email and social media contacts. We will work closely with the Mentors to identify relevant topics, the most effective means of communication, and how to strengthen the mentor-mentee relationship.

Budget

**Budget for AY2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7/1/15 balance</td>
<td>$3907.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarships for 2 Peer Mentors per semester</td>
<td>$3,000.00*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality at Workshops*</td>
<td>$65.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital recorders for workshop participants</td>
<td>$508.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Expenditures for AY2</strong></td>
<td><strong>$3,574.44</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>$333.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The current operating statement shows a $1,500 expenditure for mentor scholarships. The $1,500 balance of these funds will be distributed on 2/15/16 and 4/4/16. The $3,000 amount is the total payment.

**Budget for AY3**

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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Project Budget Fiscal Sustainability

This project has the potential to be fiscally sustainable in the future with increased university support. Funds for the scholarships would need to be directed by university scholarship dollar initiatives or converted to hourly wages.

Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 2015</td>
<td>Select and train Peer Mentors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept.-Dec. 2015</td>
<td>Peer Mentor contacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2016</td>
<td>Compilation and analysis of grade and retention data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2016</td>
<td>First semester survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2016</td>
<td>Second semester survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2016</td>
<td>Compilation and analysis of 2nd semester grade data</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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