

CLASS: Evolution of a Peer Mentoring Program

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Abstract

The Cooperative Learning and Academic Success System (CLASS) Program at Cleveland State University is designed to address the retention and achievement challenges of African American and Hispanic students through peer mentoring and academic support. This article will describe the evolution and systematic re-design of this program within the context of institutional needs, theoretical constructs, program assessment and data based decision-making. Although most of the students in the CLASS Program are traditional aged students, they, nonetheless, respond similarly to the large proportion of non-traditional aged students in terms of engagement, connection with the institution and “savvy” about navigating the environment.

Cleveland State University was established in 1964, as an open admissions, commuter campus in the urban center of Cleveland, Ohio. CSU is the second most affordable four-year institution in northeast Ohio. The average enrollment is approximately 16,000 students, including 67 percent undergraduates and 33 percent graduate and professional students, the largest percentage of any Ohio public university. The majority of CSU students work and/or juggle family responsibilities while taking classes. Of all Fall 2002 undergraduate students: 30 percent were part-time students, 55 percent were women, and 36 percent were 25 years old or older, with 13 percent were 35 years or older. Furthermore, almost 25 percent of Fall 2002 freshman level students were 25 years old or older. With the exception of one historically black public institution, CSU has the highest percentage of minority students (28 percent) among public institutions in Ohio, 18 percent of which are African American and the highest percentage of minority faculty (20 percent).

By definition then, CSU has a non-traditional student body, which typically includes an entering class comprised of more than 50 percent who are the first in their family to attend college. More than two-thirds of these first generation students are also under-prepared (less than 21 ACT), many of who are underrepresented minority students. In addition to the non-traditional nature of the CSU students, they also tend to be unengaged in academic and campus life. According to the results of the 2002 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which collected data from 206,844 undergraduates at 366 four-year colleges and universities (the sample focused on first year students and seniors), Cleveland State University respondents reported spending less time studying and preparing for class, participating in co-curricular activities and relaxing and socializing. Correspondingly, the CSU students reported spending more

time with off campus work for pay, caring for dependents and commuting to class. Although these responses were similar to other urban institutions there were areas in which the CSU students varied from the urban group as well. CSU students were less likely to report spending time on campus and less likely to expect to achieve a higher income. They also estimated taking more time to complete their education, expected to have a higher probability of work or family commitments delaying their graduation and more likely to remain in the area after graduation. Conversely, CSU students reported a higher frequency of working with other students on projects during class, inclusion of diverse perspectives and developing their ability to make informed decisions as a citizen an important outcome of their education more often than students at other institutions.

Based on the description of the CSU's non-traditional student body and reported lack of traditional student engagement in its educational enterprise, the implications for student development, service delivery and program planning are profound. This article describes the CLASS Program's attempt to engage, support and increase the retention and successful matriculation of one segment among the non-traditional, unengaged CSU student – first year underrepresented minority students on a predominantly white campus.

The CLASS Program: A Historical Overview

Many higher education institutions have established comprehensive support programs for first-year students based primarily on outreach and active engagement. Typically, programs include student and parent orientation, advising, mentoring, tutoring, support services, learning communities, and career exploration. The Office of the Vice President established the Cooperative Learning and Academic Success System (CLASS) Program in 1990 for Minority Affairs and Community Relations (OMACR) to foster recruitment and retention of minority students, particularly through the first year. Designed to assist minority students in identifying and utilizing campus resources to achieve their academic, career, and personal goals, the program monitors and supports students throughout their matriculation toward graduation.

Originally funded for three years by the Cleveland Foundation, the CLASS Program was staffed by a director, two coordinators and a secretary. During its first three years (1990-1993), CLASS annually provided 100 students with a free 6- to 8-week summer bridge program prior to the beginning of the academic year. Student participants took two to three academic classes for college credit while living and working on campus. In addition, to foster civic engagement and responsibility and to develop professionalism, the students were required to complete a weekly community service project, e.g., Habitat for Humanity, the Cleveland Food Bank, and the City Mission. Parental engagement was essential to assist parents in helping their son/daughter become successful academically and personally. CSU faculty and staff facilitated bi-weekly parent workshops on topics such as financial aid and study skills.

After fall enrollment, the CLASS Program continued to support students by monitoring their academic performance and progress, including mid-term progress reports from faculty; and providing mentoring, personal support and intervention, including referral to tutoring, the writing center and other support services. An advisory council of CSU faculty and staff also was established to provide input into the program operations and activities.

After the first three years, CLASS was institutionalized on the university budget. At that time, the decision was made to reduce the target number of new students to 50 in order to provide services to continuing students. Students remained active in the CLASS program after the first year to receive continuing student support services and participate in program activities. Subsequently, one staff position was lost due to university-wide budget reductions. This was offset to some degree by hiring a graduate assistant. As new cohorts of CLASS students persisted and the total number of CLASS students enrolled grew, it was necessary to shift the balance of program services between upper class and first-year students. The number of incoming students was reduced further to 25 as a result of increasing service demand by continuing students and limited staff. Assessment data determined that the summer residential program, which was costly, did not make an appreciable difference in the students' retention rate and was not important to CLASS students, a large majority of who would not be living on campus after the summer program. Therefore, the residential component of the summer bridge program was discontinued. From 1997-2000, the student participants commuted to the summer program, and in 2000 the entire summer bridge program was eliminated. Although CLASS Program students found the non-residential summer component helpful, it had become increasingly difficult to recruit incoming students willing to use their summer between high school and college for the eight-week summer bridge experience. In addition, summer employment was a competing factor in attracting students.

The Theoretical Framework for The CLASS Program

Many minority students experience difficulties adjusting and connecting to predominantly white colleges and universities in such areas as social integration and academic performance (Mayo, Marguia and Padilla, 1995). Much of the research on minority student retention has been focused on at-risk minority students. From this standpoint, college persistence has been linked to a number of pre-college factors related to academic preparedness as well as first year experiences that impact student retention. However, academic preparedness factors impact all students, regardless of race, while social integration factors may have a greater impact on minority students attending a predominantly white institution.

Both social and academic integration into a university are necessary for students to persist in college through degree completion (Tinto, 1987, 1993). The student interactions believed to be the most critical in determining minority student persistence are those that occur within the first six months to first year of college. Typically, minority students who successfully adapt to the university experience will establish

social relationships, adjust to cultural differences, and manage college academic requirements. Formal social integration for minority students, such as student organizational memberships and building faculty relationships in and out of the classroom are important components of academic success (Mayo, Murguía and Padilla, 1995). Formal social integration has a much greater impact on academic performance than informal social integration, which is defined as the enjoyment of social life, the degree of comfort on campus, and relationships with fellow students. Peer group socialization is influential in facilitating academic success and satisfaction (Starks, 1989). Contact with other minorities provides students with their primary network and connection to the university (Hood, 1997).

According to Vincent Tinto (2002), there are five indicators of student persistence in higher education: expectations, advice, support, involvement and learning. Student persistence depends on the “campus expectational climate” and the student’s perception of expectations by faculty and staff. Too often, institutions have low expectations and demand little from their students. When students receive clear and consistent advice about institutional requirements, programs of study, career options, and strategies for achieving their educational goals, they are more likely to persist through college. Many first year students require academic, social and personal support, which may be provided through structured methods such as mentoring programs and summer bridge experiences or interaction with advisors. Students engaged as valued members of the campus community will persist and graduate. Beyond the first year of college, student involvement with faculty, staff and other students also predicts persistence. Institutions that involve students in learning are successful in retaining them (Tinto, 2002). In addition to Tinto’s model, Sedlacek (Sedlacek and Brooks, 1976; Sedlacek and Kim, 1995; Sedlacek, 1999) identified seven non-cognitive variables that are critical in the academic success of minority students: positive self-concept or confidence, realistic self-appraisal, understanding and dealing with racism, a preference for long-range goals vs. short-term goals, availability of strong support, successful leadership experience, and demonstrated community services.

Therefore, the guidance from the retention literature indicated that special attention needed to be given to the quality of minority students’ initial college experiences and orientation experiences that followed them beyond matriculation and the first week of class (Quevedo-Garcia, 1987). Second, minority students should be assisted to enhance their academic and intellectual skills to their fullest potential. Since academic difficulty is one of the primary reasons why minority students leave college (Bean, 1986), comprehensive academic advisement plans that target these students facilitate their academic achievement. In addition, research results have indicated that intrusive academic advising which includes monitoring and early identification and intervention on behalf of students to prevent academic problems is effective in reducing attrition rates (Gardner, 1997). Based on the strong evidence provided by the literature review, the evolving CLASS Program needed to reinforce the First Year Experience advising program at Cleveland State and provide a second layer of support.

Initial Quantitative Analysis of Retention Patterns

In 2000, OMACR embarked on an in-depth analysis of retention data specifically focused on minority students. This closer look at minority students revealed that the first year retention rate for Hispanic and African American students was approximately 20 percent lower than the general university rate. Utilizing the 1999 Fall Semester cohort of entering freshman and low credit transfers as a baseline, first year attrition was 51 percent for African Americans and 54 percent for Hispanics, considerably higher than for white (30 percent) and Asian (24 percent) students (excluding international students). Almost one-third (32 percent) of Hispanic students left after the first semester, and a quarter (25 percent) of African American students left at the same time. In contrast, only 5 percent of the white and/or Asian students dropped out at the end of the Fall Semester 1999. Research looking at earlier cohorts confirmed that this first term retention gap leads to a graduation gap of similar magnitude.

Tracking of that same cohort of students indicated that the fall-to-fall retention rate of African American students was 49 percent and for Hispanic students it was 46 percent. The same cohort of white students had a fall-to-fall retention rate of 69 percent; Asian students had a retention rate of 76 percent.

The pattern of cumulative grade point average (GPA) attainment of these three groups was also quite different; 54 percent of African American students and 48 percent of Hispanic students had GPA's below 2.0, compared to 24 percent of both white and Asian students. This trend persisted. By spring semester of the second year only 37 percent of the original cohort of African American students remained in school and of those remaining only 33 percent had a GPA of 2.5 or higher and had completed 75 percent or more of attempted coursework. For Hispanic students the pattern is similar; after two years only 41 percent of the original cohort was retained, with only 36 percent of those remaining having earned a GPA of 2.5 or higher.

The cumulative effect of low GPA attainment and low retention for the African American and Hispanic students who entered CSU as first year students is that the potential number of graduates is greatly diminished. There are two points of dramatic loss of students: From fall to spring of the first year and from spring to fall of the second year. Decreasing the attrition and improving the academic success of African American and Hispanic students during that critical first year alone would likely have a dramatic effect on the graduation rates of these groups at CSU.

In response to the findings regarding the retention and achievement of African American and Hispanic students at CSU and to best address the needs of first time freshmen, OMACR staff reviewed the CLASS program and began to investigate potential changes in a systematic way. A fuller understanding of the retention literature that forms the theoretical underpinnings for appropriate action, exploration of other successful retention programs and further quantitative analysis guided these efforts.

Further Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

To determine if CLASS had any statistically significant long-term impact on these groups of students, the two-year mean retention rates were compared for 1993-1995 and 1997-1999. These years represented outcomes of the program for the six-year period after it was institutionalized in 1993. For African American students, the rates were 53 percent for both time periods, respectively, and showed no significant difference (Chi sq, $df=1= .04$, $p>.05$).

For Hispanic students, the rates were 50 percent and 53.3 percent and also showed no significant difference (Chi sq, $df=1= .41$, $p>.05$). Although no quantitative difference was found, annual program evaluation by students revealed some qualitative value related to Tinto's indicators of student persistence, including goal setting, support and advice, mentoring, learning, and self-assessment. Based on these findings and previous research findings regarding retention and achievement for the larger African American and Hispanic student populations at CSU, the decision was made to refocus the CLASS Program from recruitment and retention to academic achievement and graduation. If successful, an increase in retention would also be an outcome.

In order to develop a plan of action for restructuring the CLASS Program, qualitative data needed to be obtained to complement institutional data. The voices of the students were sought. Focus groups of CSU African American and Hispanic students were conducted to determine what factors contribute to Hispanic and African American student persistence at the university. Students were asked to describe their experiences at CSU and the type of support they would have benefited from as new students. The themes from both identity groups suggest the importance of the:

- Connection on a personal level with other students as well as faculty and staff from their identity group or with those able to share common experiences;
- Development of better time management and study skills;
- Connection between academic course work and career preparation;
- Development of skills needed for life after the degree, including public speaking, internships and job search;
- Connection with academic support programs such as tutoring.

The CLASS Program Today

Based on the quantitative and qualitative data, a brief review of the literature on student retention (Allen, 1992; Brown, 2000; Gardner, 1997; Levin and Levin, 1991; Light, 2001; Sedlacek, 1999; Tinto, 1993 and 2002) and current retention programs described at national and regional conferences, the decision was made to adopt an intrusive peer mentoring approach to intervention with minority students structured on the basis of cultural identity group. The Black Male Initiative (BMI) Kikundi Program, a small qualitatively successful peer-mentoring program targeted for newly enrolled African American freshmen had been operating at CSU for five years under a renewable grant awarded to OMACR by the United Black Fund. Coordinated by a

graduate student, BMI Kikundi became the basic model for CLASS Program restructuring. Accordingly, the BMI was transferred to the CLASS Program, which became the umbrella for that program as well as for the establishment of the Black Women Initiative (BWI), and the Hispanic Retention Initiative (HRI). Components of the re-structured program include peer mentoring, academic support services referral, staff support, and planned social events that foster engagement.

Twenty-five successful upper class African American and Hispanic students were recruited and selected to serve as peer mentors on the basis of a GPA of at least 2.5, leadership skills and campus involvement. Non-traditional themselves, the peer mentors provide a diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and entry paths into the university. The demographic characteristics include: married students, students who are parents, older returning students, transfer students, students who entered as freshmen, and former CLASS Program students. The positive relationship with and support from peer mentors sometimes resulted in a mentee becoming a peer mentor in subsequent years. Currently four of the CLASS peer mentors are former mentees. Peer mentors are required to attend two training sessions and they are encouraged to participate in the CSU Certified Student Leader Program through the Department of Student Life. In addition, peer mentors are provided with opportunities to attend and participate in state, regional and national leadership training workshops. A small fund is allocated for mentor/mentee activities, and mentors are compensated with a nominal stipend at the end of each semester.

Peer mentors recruit program participants using an assigned list of newly admitted African American and Hispanic students. The new freshmen are then assigned to the peer mentors on the basis of an intake interview. The peer mentors are responsible for maintaining contact with their assigned freshmen at least three times each semester to provide the assistance that will support their matriculation and achievement at CSU. In Fall 2001, there were 50 mentees (including new first-time freshman and freshman transfers), representing 18 percent of the incoming freshmen-level African American, Hispanic and Native American students, supported by 20 peer mentors. In Fall 2002, there were 52 mentees, representing 19 percent of the target group, and 20 peer mentors. For Fall 2003, 57 new freshmen enrolled as mentees, representing 20 percent of the target groups, and were served by 23 peer mentors, three of whom were mentored in the Fall 2001.

Since the restructuring of the CLASS Program in 2001, preliminary data show that the program makes a statistically significant difference in the fall-to-fall retention for new first-time, full-time African American and Hispanic freshman cohort students. Of the 32 freshman cohort mentees for the 2001-2002 program year, 63 percent (20) returned in Fall 2002, compared to 52 percent (130 of 250) of eligible non-participants, representing an 11 percent increase in retention. For Fall 2002 new full-time freshman cohort mentees, 69 percent (18 of 26 mentees) returned compared to 51 percent (127 of 248) of eligible non-participants, representing an 18 percent increase in retention. The two-year mean retention rate showed that the higher retention rate for CLASS Program students compared to eligible non-participants (68 percent to 51 percent) is

statistically significant (Chi sq, $df=1 = 4.54$, $p < .05$). Additional research about the high school grades and test scores of participants and non-participants indicates that the difference in mean two-year retention between these groups is not a function of differences in their academic input characteristics (see Table 1).

Table 1. Fall 2001 and 2002 Freshman Cohort CLASS Program participants HS Performance Indicators and CSU Academic Performance						
	N	Mean test score	Median HS GPA	Retained students median CSU GPA	Retained students mean earned degree credits	Fall to Fall retention rate
2001 and 2002 New Freshman cohort African American and Hispanic students						
CLASS Participants	58	16.3	2.72	2.48	21	67.2%
Non-Participants	519	16.7	2.46	2.27	24	51.1%
Total	577					

Conclusion

The CLASS Program has evolved from a summer bridge program to a cultural identity group peer-mentoring program over a period of 13 years. In the process, it has shifted its focus from recruitment and retention to achievement and graduation, while staying true to its overall mission to improve the retention of minority students, particularly in the first year. Theoretical frameworks of Tinto and Sedlacek have provided a foundation for program development. External and internal factors have led to key decision points. Program review and outcomes assessment, including quantitative and qualitative data, have driven critical decision-making.

Although preliminary indicators of program impact are promising, the newness of the restructured CLASS Program precludes making statements about the long-term success of the program and/or how students persist beyond the first year. Annual assessment of the program and student outcomes will be critical to determining success, and the statistical significance of early results is encouraging. Specifically, the assessment plan, which is tied directly to the goals and objectives of the program, requires that all aspects of the program are fully implemented and rigorously reviewed. For example, the number of contacts made by the mentors will be captured, the satisfaction with and quality of the mentor/mentee interaction will be evaluated, the mid-term grades will be monitored so that appropriate referral can be made to support the student's needs and complement academic advising, the fall-to-fall and semester-to-semester retention will be determined, and the number and nature of problem-solving/referral activities will be tracked. These data will help us to determine the overall success of the program and determine what changes, adjustments and/or improvements need to be made as the program progresses. Graduation data was first collected in May 2005 and the baseline for six-year graduation data will be established in 2007.

Another area of assessment will include a closer look at the experiences of the peer mentors. Although the primary focus of the program is on freshmen, a byproduct of the new structure has been the leadership development and retention of the peer mentors. Peer mentors have become more “institutionally savvy,” more grade conscious, felt supported in the pursuit of graduation, and orientated and motivated toward graduate school. In addition, they have had the opportunity to develop a sense of being more “other-centered” and have gained an increased sense of civic responsibility. Consequently, a component for monitoring the development of the peer mentors will be added to the CLASS Program assessment plan.

As a program for one segment of the non-traditional student population, the CLASS Program is a work in progress that has shown promising statistically significant short-term outcomes. Positive long-term outcomes are expected to follow.

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