

LCC president: 'We need to do better'

College taking hard look at student success

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Last fall, 124 students signed up for College Algebra II at Lansing Community College. Seventy-two of them either didn't finish or didn't do well enough to go on to the next level.

Of the 829 students taking more than one remedial course in fall 2006, 214 failed more than one.

The most recent graduation rate that LCC reported to the federal government, an imperfect measure at best, was 11 percent. That's low compared to most other community colleges in the state.

LCC's leaders have begun to take a hard look at how well the college is serving its students, and they acknowledge too few are succeeding.

The cost of failure is high, they say, not only for students, but for a state that's struggling to remain economically competitive.

LCC President Brent Knight, who stepped into the job only days ago, put it simply: "We need to do better."

Identifying leaks

More than 34,000 students enrolled at LCC in 2006-07. Nearly 2,500 graduated. But, alongside those successes, there are leaks in the college's educational pipeline.

The failure rates in some of LCC's largest courses top 30 percent. Among students taking more than one remedial course in the fall of 2006, 44 percent didn't make the grade in at least one, and 26 percent failed at least two. Most of those in the latter group didn't return the following semester.

LCC's graduation rate "is not where it should be," according to Todd Troutman, chair of the Mathematical Skills Department and part of a team looking at retention and success issues.

Graduation isn't the only measure of success, said Dean of Students Rebekah Woods, but "we need to make sure we help those who are coming here be successful."

LCC has a plan in place, but, as Knight noted, the issue of community college success "is more complex than simple."

To begin with, LCC, like most community colleges, is an open access institution, where anyone with a high school diploma or GED can enroll.

Many less prepared

Many students arrive less prepared than their counterparts at four-year schools. The majority need some form of remedial education.

Community college students are also, in general, poorer, more likely to be first generation college students, to work more hours, to have children at home, to attend part time - all factors that can make academic success more of a struggle.

Graduation rates don't take into account the fact that community colleges have multiple missions, providing work-force training, for example, or preparing students to transfer to a four-year school.

And they don't account for the fact that not all students want to graduate.

Peter McShane Lewis, 33, was one of them. He had dropped out of six schools and put his education on hold for years before deciding to try again in 2006.

He arrived at LCC with a clear goal: "Take all your pre-requisites here and then transfer somewhere else."

A year later, he was enrolled at Michigan State University.

LCC gave Lewis what he wanted. But because federal graduation and transfer rates only measure full-time, degree-seeking students who are going to college for the first time, his success won't be counted.

"We have students who might be in the work force and just need to come back and take a class or two," Woods said. "It's not going to give them any kind of credential, but it's going to be exactly what they need."

The problem is that LCC can't say with much certainty how many of its students fall into that category.

The college asks students about their educational goals when they apply, but like most other community colleges, doesn't track whether they achieve them in any consistent way.

And not all students who leave without graduating do so because they've met their goals.

Terrie Williams has enrolled at LCC three times, and three times she's dropped out. Life circumstances got in the way: a failing marriage, the death of her mother, financial difficulties.

But Williams, 43, also said she struggled at LCC to find someone to talk to, someone to help her through the rough patches.

"They don't give you help when you need it," she said. "I had a 3.5 GPA until I hit some hard classes, and when I needed help, there were always long lines for the instructor, for the counselor, for the adviser."

Former LCC President Judith Cardenas formed a team to look at retention and success issues in 2006 because "it became quite obvious that we needed a more comprehensive approach."

In the fall of that year, she brought in the higher education consulting firm Noel Le-vitz to assess the situation.

What they found was an institution where many people planned for student success, but they weren't necessarily talking to one another or looking at the sort of hard data that could tell them whether their plans were succeeding.

"They were sort of in what I would call 'excessive activity syndrome,' " said Tim Culver, the firm's vice president of consulting services. "They were doing lots of stuff, but they didn't know if it was accomplishing the goals they wanted to accomplish."

Robin Smith, the chair of LCC's Board of Trustees, said the college "has never taken its eye off" issues of student success, but other issues have sometimes taken priority.

"If you look at the number of huge challenges that Lansing Community College has had in terms of a new president, the challenges we've had in IT, the college has had to stretch itself in so many different directions," she said.

She referred to the financial aid and registration problems caused by LCC's Oracle software system, which the college has since spent more than \$9 million to replace, and to the fight those problems sparked between the board and the college's administration. That led to the ouster of former President Paula Cunningham and the departure of several top administrators in early 2006.

Given those challenges, she said, the college didn't "put the necessary resources or manpower to look at these things (student success)."

Changing emphasis

For years, many community colleges focused mainly on getting students in the door, said Nancy Shulock, executive director for the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at Sacramento State University.

That's changing, she said, "with the increasing awareness that we're in a global competition, we're experiencing shortages of educated workers and that the United States is slipping in relation to other developed and developing countries in terms of the number of people who have college degrees."

The situation in Michigan is, if anything, more dire - the state ranks 34th in the nation for adults with a bachelor's degree or more - and its urgency hasn't been lost on state leaders.

In late 2004, the Lt. Governor's Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth, commonly known as the Cherry Commission, challenged colleges to improve their graduation rates and to align their work with the state's economic needs.

And there's a link, said Kay McClenney, director of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, between graduation and economic success.

"Graduation is good," she said. Students who complete an associate's degree "are going to earn more, have better life chances, better career opportunities than students who have just some college."

Doug Stites, chief executive officer of Capital Area Michigan Works, said Michigan "has always defied gravity." Jobs paid well and didn't require much education.

That's over, he said, and, without a more educated work force, the state will continue "assuming our normal, natural place in the earning scale based on our education."

LCC's leaders say the work of the past two years has prepared them to meet that challenge.

"Now we're in a position, and now we have the leadership," Smith said. "We can step up and move with the plan."