March 19, 2014

DEGREES project eases path to graduation

In 2009, the California State University Chancellor’s Office mandated that Sacramento State increase its six-year graduation rate for freshmen and transfer students.

The call for change came when state funding was scarce, making it very difficult to achieve those objectives. The University met that challenge with several innovative programs designed to improve retention and graduation rates, particularly among underrepresented students, including African Americans, Chicanos/Latinos, American Indians and Pacific Islanders.

In 2013, Sac State’s Student Academic Success and Educational Equity Programs (SASEEP) unit received a grant from the Chancellor’s Office as a part of the system-wide Graduation Initiative. The Dedicated to Educating, Graduating, and Retaining Educational Equity Students (DEGREES) project funded by the grant seeks to provide enhanced services to underrepresented students not currently served by an equity program to accelerate progress to their degrees.

To mobilize this campaign, Marcellene L. Watson-Derbigny, associate vice president for Student Retention, focused on best practices modeled from other SASEEP programs such as the College Assistance Migrant Program, the Educational Opportunity Program, the Faculty Student Mentor Program, the Full Circle Project and the Peer and Academic Resource Center.

Charged with overseeing student retention and academic success, Watson-Derbigny ramped up efforts that were working and introduced some new programming to support students. Services of DEGREES include online mentoring and tutoring opportunities as well as peer coaching and faculty support.

In addition, as part of the Graduation Initiative, an online “dashboard” will debut during the Fall 2014 semester. “This will enable students to assess their units earned and those needed to graduate,” she says, “because many of our scholars need this essential tracking device to know where they stand academically.”

Watson-Derbigny’s overarching objective is to maintain the personal touch that begins with student orientation but frequently fades as the college journey becomes more complicated. “We need to reach our students with tutoring, mentoring and the
general support needed to excel in college,” she says. Viridiana Diaz, co-director of the DEGREES project, says the ongoing goal is to assist students with identifying their specific needs to effectively navigate campus services.

For media assistance, contact Sacramento State’s Public Affairs office at (916) 278-6156. – Alan Miller

Sacramento State is making a difference in California’s Capital Region and beyond. We offer a life-changing opportunity for our 28,000 students, preparing them to be leaders in their professions and communities. Our professors are known for their dedication to great teaching. And our location in the capital of the nation’s most populous state allows students to pursue unique internships and research.

### 46-S14-AM