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Implementing and Assessing the Owl Success Track at PGCC

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The Owl Success Track – First Year Experience (FYE) program at Prince George's Community College aims to provide a pathway to success for students new to the college. The goal of this program is to create a seamless transition into college through an integrated approach to the challenges students face navigating the institution and the classroom, in their personal lives, and the many complexities involved in becoming members of a larger college community. This program fits into PGCC's strategic priorities, as the college seeks to better serve its large, predominantly minority student population. In fall 2009 PGCC had 2,782 first-time college students, 77.9% African American and 8.3% Hispanic or Latino.

The presentation will focus on the first component of the FYE, the Student Orientation, Advising and Registration initiative, also known as SOAR. The presenters will discuss the institutional background leading to the creation of SOAR, explain the methods used to assess it, present key findings, and propose topics for further discussion.

The presenters were directly involved in the experience discussed. Laura Ariovich is a Research and Planning Analyst in the Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research (OPAIR). She designed and implemented the SOAR assessment plan. Crystal Smith is Manager of Student Success Programs and an adjunct faculty member. She designed the FYE, including SOAR, and has been in charge of its implementation since its inception.

A. The Owl Success Track — First Year Experience and SOAR

The vision for the FYE is that students completing the program will have the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully navigate the college's enrollment, academic, and support services, so as to enable the realization of their educational goals. Prior to creating the PGCC program, other FYE programs in the area were researched to find not only best practices but practices with a "best fit" for PGCC. Each program reviewed had the following components: 1. Application process; 2. Full time students accept schedule; 3. Half day orientation program; 4. Student success course; and 5. Complete master education plan. Prince George's Community College already offered these services, but they were managed by several departments

and offices. Through the FYE program, the college was able to streamline the advising and registration experience for new students.

The first task was to create a definition of a “first year student” as it relates to PGCC. A first year student was defined as “a student who has attempted less than 18 credit hours or the equivalent, at Prince George’s Community College.” Once the definition was created, a program that would specifically benefit this population was designed.

The initial component of this program was the Student, Orientation, Advising, and Registration initiative (SOAR). The goals of this orientation are divided into three categories:

- **Institutional Understanding**, including the goal of assisting students in understanding the purpose of higher education
- **Academic Understanding**, including the goal of providing information concerning academic policies, procedures and requirements
- **Student and Parent Transition**, including the goal of creating an atmosphere that minimizes anxiety, promotes positive attitudes, and stimulates an excitement for learning

The second task was to ensure that the orientation program would benefit students attending all PGCC locations. The main campus, Largo, has the staff and resources to offer full-day, face-to-face orientation sessions to new students. The full-day sessions contained several workshops facilitated by staff members from various departments. Running these workshops required a detailed assignment schedule requesting staff members to volunteer for presentations. However, because of staff size and limited resources, the College’s off-campus centers are not equipped to handle full day, face-to-face orientation sessions offered several days during the week.

To remedy this issue, an on-line version of the SOAR orientation containing the information students received face-to-face was created. The off-campus centers are able to utilize the on-line version of SOAR for most of the orientation and then complete the advising and registration process face-to-face. This hybrid format allows the off-campus locations to offer a comprehensive orientation program without requiring as many staff members. In addition, the work schedules of Largo campus staff were adjusted to assist the other locations as needed.

The on-line version of SOAR is also available for all students who are not able to attend the face-to-face or the hybrid sessions. These students go through the on-line orientation on campus or at home and then meet with an advisor for registration.

Once the program was put into place, the next step was to determine the assessment plan.

B. The SOAR Assessment Plan

The assessment of SOAR was conducted by PGCC’s Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research (OPAIR). Providing an accurate assessment required that three issues be addressed. First, how could feedback be obtained from students participating in SOAR? Second, how could the assessment be useful for the SOAR leadership team as a means to allow for continuous improvement? And third, how could data be captured dynamically, i.e. as the program was occurring, rather than after the fact via survey administration?

These issues were addressed via a mixed-methods approach, combining an on-line survey of students' experiences with participant observation of SOAR sessions. All SOAR participants, no matter where or how they were exposed to the SOAR orientation, were asked to fill out an on-line survey. Survey questions asked students when they attended the SOAR program, what they accomplished while at SOAR, and how they rated the overall program and its different components. Administering the survey on campus for participants in the face-to-face and hybrid formats resulted in a high response rate. Over 70% of participants in the face-to-face sessions and the hybrid program completed the survey; in the case of the on-line SOAR, the response rate was close to 40%.

In addition, participant observation was conducted at seven SOAR sessions—five face-to-face and two hybrid. Participant observation involved systematic observation and note-taking at SOAR sessions, coupled with non-intrusive interaction with students, speakers, advisors, and the SOAR leadership team. Special attention was paid to three aspects of SOAR: 1. Participants' responses and interaction with speakers and advisors; 2. The consistency of the information conveyed to students across different sections of the program and different locations; and 3. The use of time and staff resources for each section of the program.

The on-line survey enabled feedback from most participants in the SOAR program in its different formats, schedules, and locations. An additional advantage of the survey was the opportunity to download and analyze partial subsets of data at any point in time throughout the program. Partial results downloaded at the end of the first week were then used to refine the survey. Partial results also served as a baseline to assess the program's performance and provide information that could result in mid-course revisions as necessary.

Participant observation, in turn, produced new insights regarding the organization of SOAR. These insights informed the decision to allot more time and resources to much-needed one-on-one advising to new students. As a result, students learned about their program of study and the courses they needed to take before registration, and registration became smoother and less time-consuming. In addition, participant observation provided a channel for ongoing interaction between OPAIR and the SOAR leadership team, speakers, and advisors. Through this channel, OPAIR was updated and in turn provided feedback on ongoing program adjustments in the face of unexpected problems and challenges.

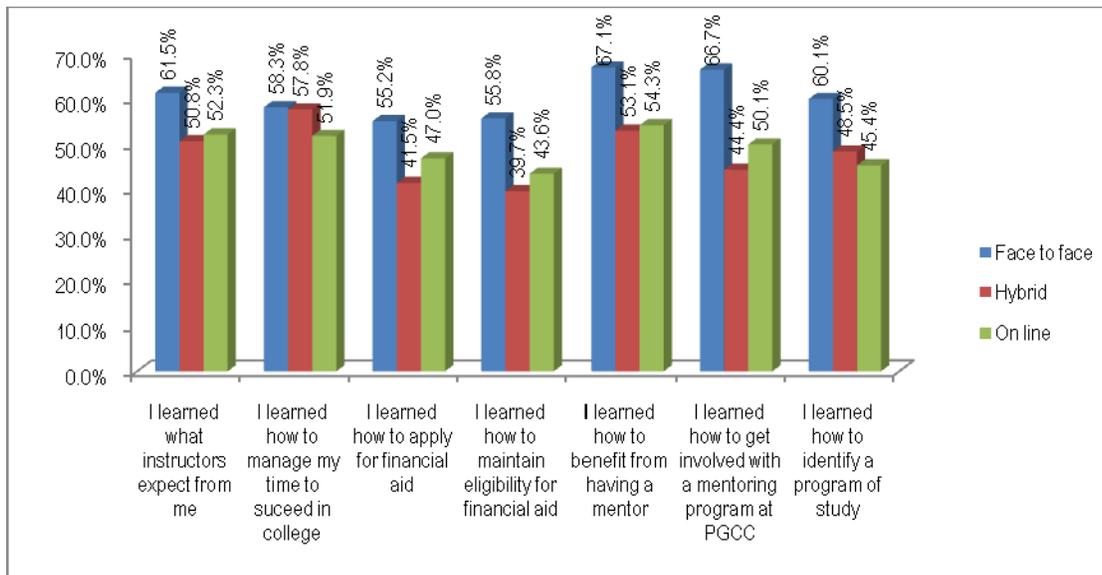
The two sources of data complemented and strengthened each other. The survey results allowed the OPAIR staff to confirm some of the insights derived from participant observation. At the same time, findings from participant observation were instrumental for introducing "quality checks" on survey findings. First-hand knowledge of what happened during the program was useful to weed out survey responses that became irrelevant in light of the final content of the program. This type of knowledge also served to contextualize survey responses and to understand what respondents actually meant when they answered survey questions.

C. Key findings and topics for further discussion

Survey results show highly positive evaluations of the SOAR program by most participants in its different formats: the face-to-face sessions at Largo, the hybrid sessions at UTC, and the on-line SOAR.

At the same time, students' evaluations of what they learned at SOAR were stronger for the face-to-face sessions, compared to the other two formats. For example, 67.1% of participants in the face-face sessions strongly agreed with the statement "I learned how I can benefit from having a mentor," compared to 53.1% of participants in the hybrid program and 54.3% of participants in the on-line SOAR. The face-to-face sessions came ahead as well in the areas of instructors' expectations, financial aid, and academic advising (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Students' evaluations of what they learned at SOAR



Source: SOAR survey, PGCC.

The comparison of survey results between the two other formats, the hybrid sessions at UTC and the on-line SOAR, did not show clear advantages for either. However, observation showed that participants in the hybrid sessions enjoyed access to additional information and resources.

In light of these results, two related topics stand out for further discussion. First, what should be the role of technology in orientation programs for new students? And second, what's the best use of (limited) staff resources? As suggested by the assessment findings, something got lost when face-to-face interaction with students was replaced entirely or in part with an on-line orientation. Even though the content of the information conveyed to students was the same across formats, the face-to-face program created value-added for new students. To put survey responses in context, speakers in the face-to-face format brought up personal, real-life examples to answer questions and give emphasis to the topics covered. In addition, students were able to establish a personal connection with college representatives from different departments; in fact, speakers provided their own contact information in case students needed assistance throughout the academic year.

On the other hand, expanding the face-to-face sessions and, even replicating them on the same scale next semester would likely produce staff burnout. From this standpoint, it is crucial to consider different alternatives for future orientation programs. Can the on-line orientation be improved and made more appealing? How can the hybrid program be adjusted to expand and strengthen interaction between students and college representatives? Would it be reasonable to spread out specific aspects of the face-to-face sessions throughout the semester in the form of special topic workshops? Discussions around these questions will continue to inform internal planning of future orientation programs at PGCC.