Ad-hoc Committee on Student Retention
Academic Assembly
Michael J. Grant Campus
Report
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This Report fulfills the charge from the Grant Campus Academic Assembly in Resolution 2019-02-[01] Authorizing the Formation of an Ad-hoc Committee on Student Retention.

Summary

The Committee concludes that the Grant campus can make significant improvements in student retention if we were to improve our organizational ability to produce practical outcomes for our students. We recommend that the conversation about improving retention not be conducted by singling out individual groups for suggested improvements. Our experience is that every group on campus is working extremely hard, and every group is open and eager for change. It is our lack of teamwork and coordination that creates gaps where students fall through and are not retained. Every group on campus is pursuing student success in its own way, and we are currently less than the sum of our parts.

The Committee recommends that initiatives be framed as broad issues that impact every department or group on campus. We should treat each individual project to improve retention as an exercise to improve teamwork across all groups to achieve a common goal. Examples of such exercises in teamwork are given in this report. This report also gives individual suggestions that can be conceived as broad initiatives to provide platforms for the exercise of campus-wide teamwork.

The Committee believes that the current enrollment situation is being prudently addressed from a fiscal perspective by the administration. The population of high school graduates naturally ebbs and flows, and the true historical driver of community college enrollment—economic recessions that encourage worker retraining and skills acquisition—will visit the College again soon. The effort to improve student retention should be conceived as the need to prepare the College for the next influx of students. It is the challenge of educating our next generation of students for the jobs of the near future, and the moral responsibility to meet the academic needs and expectations of our students when we accept them into the College.

Contents

1. Scope of this Report

The Committee decided not to reproduce analyses and suggestions that have already been made across the College, especially suggestions that are based on the need to become more student-centered. These analyses are correct and necessary, but they are also very well understood. We have had several forums to disseminate these ideas, most notably at Professional Development Day.

The Committee decided to focus on analyses and ideas that are new to our campus conversation about student retention. We were fortunate to have committee members from many different parts of campus. In addition to classroom faculty, we have membership from Admissions, Educational Technology, Library, Workforce Development, AAMC, Honors Program, and the Tutoring Centers. One committee member is an adjunct. All committee members are volunteers, and what they have in common is a deep personal desire to understand the problem of student retention as it impacts their own groups. The effects of student retention and recent enrollment issues are obvious across every group on campus. The Committee enjoys broad support from various groups across campus, including administration, leading us to the conclusion that almost everyone is working hard to solve the College's problems, and almost everyone is open to change how we do our jobs.

The Committee focused on the big picture: How does the College integrate the efforts of every group to provide educational outcomes that are worth our students' time, effort, and money? We found that each group on campus toils in isolation, with very few goals and philosophies that are shared by other groups. When students pass through various phases in their career within the College, they are confronted with a dizzying array of expectations that are uncoordinated and that, taken together, are fundamentally illogical.

The Committee concludes that as an organization, we are currently less than the sum of our parts. Everyone is working very hard, but they are working for uncoordinated purposes, and too often the goals of one group contradict the goals of another. We recommend that the College align the goals of each group so that our efforts support and amplify one another, making the organization more than the sum of our parts. Although this report is restricted to the Grant campus, we note that the current state of teamwork and coordination among our campuses is lacking as well. At a time of diminished resources, teamwork across the College is more important than ever.

This report describes the current state of teamwork at the College, and suggests a plan for giving the campus systematic practice in teamwork while addressing individual needs for improving student retention.

2. The Need for Teamwork

[Note: This section of the Report necessarily describes individual groups on campus and their role in the larger organization. Because the Committee does not want to single out individual groups for improvement, we will also note how each group currently excels within the goals that are set for them.]

When a potential student encounters the College, decides to become a student, takes classes, and in the best case, graduates from the program of his or her choice, the student is touched by many different parts of the College. In a fully integrated organization, the goals of each part of the College should be consistent. This is currently not the case.

Advertising is largely centralized at the College. It produces spots on radio, TV, and internet. It also produces pamphlets and materials that are used by other groups at the College. The goal of the College's advertising efforts is to reach as many potential students as possible to persuade them to enroll. Our advertising follows principles that are prevalent in the industry: we identify what the public wants and we emphasize how we can fulfill that desire. Some of the basic themes of our advertising include the joy of the traditional college experience, the low cost of attendance, and flexibility with work and family life. When individual programs are mentioned at all, they are generally programs that are already popular and oversubscribed, such as Nursing, or programs that are telegenic but without a broad demonstrated need in the community. Useful programs where high paying jobs are currently plentiful, such as manufacturing technology and other workforce development programs, are not given much advertising. There is also little or no mention of responsibilities and obstacles students will likely face, such as developmental studies. Many of the messages that are promulgated by our advertising hurt student retention, because they do not educate the public about the true value of a community college education, and they do not prepare the public for the sacrifices that are necessary if a student is to reach his or her goals.

[Note that our advertising group is a very savvy and hardworking set of individuals who have won awards for their work on behalf of the College. They have limited resources, and they do a very good job of reaching many potential students with those resources. The effect that the College enjoys from our advertising far exceeds the money that is spent on it.]

Admissions tries to attract students through high school visits, college fairs, and other events. They give students admissions counseling, and try to bring the student through the admissions process as quickly and efficiently as possible. The admissions process must work within the College's status as an open enrollment institution, and the political imperative to make access the priority. As a result, they do not have the tools or the mandate to prepare students for the challenges ahead of them; their goal is to attract and enroll as many students a possible. The College does not have an application deadline. Our effective deadline to apply is one week after the semester has already begun. At traditional colleges, the application deadline is as much as nine months before, and the student must matriculate at least three months before the semester begins. The intention of early application and matriculation deadlines is to force incoming students to create the conditions in their lives to help them be successful. For traditional colleges, preparation includes moving to the college itself. Our Admissions counselors inform students about Testing and Placement, and the possibility that they will have to take developmental classes, but many potential students do not believe developmental studies will apply to them, and do not treat the Testing and Placement process with enough respect. Also, an increasing number of our students apply online, and do not speak with an Admissions counselor at all. Many students are admitted who do not

have a realistic appreciation of the time and effort necessary for success in college. Retention is hurt when new students are admitted who are not prepared for the rigors of college.

[Note that Admissions has been producing astonishing results for many years. The percentage of potential college students who enroll at SCCC has increased, and the enrollment of new students has been affected almost entirely by the reduced population of potential students. Admissions has been enrolling available students as effectively as ever. Despite the challenges of low resources and the status of SCCC in the hierarchy of higher education, Admissions continues to exceed expectations in fulfilling their goal of enrolling as many students as possible. While new student enrollment has increased in recent years, retention continues to lag, suggesting that the rest of the College is not meeting our students' needs.]

Testing and **Counseling** processes students after they have been admitted, gauging how prepared they are for college studies, and placing them in appropriate classes and programs. The goal of our Testing group is to test students as efficiently as possible to determine their skills in reading, writing, and math. The goal of the Counseling group is to apply the academic standards given to them to place students in classes as efficiently as possible. The result of Testing and Counseling is that the majority of incoming students are placed in developmental studies in at least one area. The goals of Testing and Counseling are opposed to the goals of Advertising and Admissions. Many students realize that they have to go through Testing and Counseling only after they have been admitted. This is also the first time they may be fully aware of the need for developmental studies, where they would be required to take classes that do not count for college credit. There is evidence that student retention is hurt by the disconnect between the goals of Advertising/Admissions and Testing/Counseling even before a student shows up in a classroom. Many students disappear from the student intake process before they come for testing, and many students will decide not to register for classes after testing. Students report not taking testing seriously, and they will try to complete the hours-long tests as quickly as possible. Student retention is hurt when students apply to college expecting the college experience, but are confronted with tests and developmental classes that reflect what they thought they escaped when they graduated from high school.

[Note that Testing gives students the opportunity to exceed their high school transcript. The vast majority of students who are identified by Testing as being unprepared for college work actually do need remediation. Testing and Counseling do their jobs with outstanding efficiency even with low resources. Counseling gives students their first, most personal encounter with the College. They treat students with humanity and compassion, and truly have the students' best interests at heart. They have to contend with the College's open enrollment / access mandate, and with the fact that K-12 schools (and parents) in our area leave many students unprepared for the rigors of college.]

Faculty in Developmental Studies give students remedial instruction in reading, writing, and math. The goal of developmental studies is to bring the basic skills of students to the college level, giving them the prerequisites for important gateway classes in Social Sciences, English, Physical Sciences, and Math. Developmental classes have students at many different skill levels across the K-12 spectrum. Some students need beginner level skills (K-6) and some students actually have college level skills, but did not treat the placement test with enough respect. Instructors will begin the semester with the most basic skills to gauge the skills of every student and try to bring each student up to speed. As a result, students who were sold on the college experience by Advertising and Admissions begin their college

career reading young adult literature in reading classes, writing basic personal reflection essays in writing classes, and doing addition and subtraction in math classes. Students feel keenly that they are doing K-12 work in non-credit classes. In order to bring students to the college level within one or two semesters, instructors will resort to rote memorization, tips and tricks, and paint-by-numbers processes to train students in basic skills. These forms of pedagogy do not resemble the critical thinking and intelligent reflection that are part of the traditional college curriculum. Many students repeat developmental courses for several semesters, exhausting their financial aid and personal savings. They also exhaust their patience, and retention is hurt. Developmental classes often become tests of survival, rather than a venue of education.

[Note that faculty in developmental studies are given the difficult task of remediating 12 years of education in one or two semesters. Many students fall short of college level work because of ancillary issues, such as poor study habits, learning disabilities, or problems in their personal and work lives. Developmental faculty have historically been very accommodating of students. Developmental studies have been an area where innovation and reform have been happening for many years, showing the eagerness of departments and faculty to serve our students better.]

Faculty in college credit classes offer courses that will help students fulfill a course of study to complete particular programs while satisfying other requirements such as General Education. Faculty see the goal of their classes to be the cultivation of knowledge within their particular disciplines. The focus on disciplines often obscures the broader goals of students who take their classes. Many students have no interest in General Education disciplines. Many classes reproduce content that students have experienced before in their junior high and high school careers. Much of our curriculum, such as our largest and most amorphous program, Liberal Arts – General Studies, is out of date. Faculty structure their classes with the assumption that students want to earn the highest grade possible, and they will use grades as incentives for achievement. Many students have little interest in high grades, however. They intend to transfer to four-year institutions, which means that their SCCC classes will transfer without grades. They only have to earn a C to make the class eligible for transfer. Many students are in college because other people in their lives, especially parents, have pressured them into going to school. They have minimal interest in any kind of achievement in their classes, and their classroom comportment is a serious challenge to instructors. The focus on disciplines hurts retention, because students do not see a connection between their classes and their educational goals. Many factors that determine student success are hidden from faculty and beyond their control. The experience in many classrooms does not resemble the deep exploration of knowledge that is supposed to be part of the traditional college experience.

[Note that faculty in college credit classes bring enormous expertise and experience into the classroom. Almost all of them update their courses regularly to reflect professional development, and they are constantly trying to improve their pedagogy. They manage big course loads with big class sizes. American higher education is based on a faculty organized around disciplines, and SCCC derives its legitimacy from its faculty teaching the disciplines in which they are trained.]

Faculty in curriculum development update existing courses and programs to conform to current knowledge and educational requirements. They also create new courses and programs. The current curriculum process is long and tedious, with even minor changes to courses taking a year to pass through all the layers of approval. The curriculum process requires a lot of paperwork that is still

handled off-line, making it difficult to consult broadly with other groups on campus until the curriculum is almost ready for approval. The lack of consultation prevents other groups, such as Admissions and Counseling, from communicating changes and initiatives to incoming students effectively. Faculty developing curriculum make many mistakes, because the paperwork and process are byzantine. There is only a handful of faculty in the College with enough experience to navigate the curriculum process. Many of the problems stem from a history of the separate campuses being treated by oversight agencies such as SUNY and Middle States as separate entities. As a result, each campus has separate academic departments, separate curriculum committees, and separate governance bodies all approving curriculum. Including the College Curriculum Committee and the approval of deans and other academic officers, some proposals may need as many as 14 different approvals, even for simple uncontroversial changes. The many layers of approval also create chokepoints where useful proposals may be delayed or stopped completely for reasons that do not reflect any benefit for students. The poor curriculum process also results in inconsistencies in the classroom, because many classroom faculty who did not participate in the process, especially adjunct faculty, will often depart from the official course outline to try to give their students better instruction. The curriculum process hurts retention, because students are not given a rational, up-to-date curriculum that changes quickly to meet the academic needs at transfer schools and the workplace.

[Note that faculty in curriculum development perform their work as service to the institution. They have to learn and practice a very difficult process that has large consequences for the College. They are scrutinized by outside agencies, and they must navigate complex special interests with a stake in the shape of the curriculum.]

Student support services offer students facilities to promote their academic success. These services include tutoring, library, educational technology, and advising. Poor communication often results in students being unaware of the services available to them, and poor motivation among students make them unlikely to take advantage of the services even if they are aware of them. Communication and student motivation reach into the heart of our student retention issues.

3. Examples of Plans of Action

Once the campus decides on initiatives to address student retention, we should treat each initiative as opportunities to improve teamwork and coordination. Even though many initiatives will naturally focus on one or two groups, we should conceive of the project as broadly as possible to include the entire campus community. Each group should be aware of the goal of the initiative, and each group should identify its role in promoting that goal. Below are two examples of plans of action addressing two problems contributing to student retention.

Curriculum Development

Goal: To provide students with an up-to-date curriculum that reflects the current state of knowledge, and that addresses academic needs at transfer schools and the workplace.

- **Administration and Faculty** will reform the curriculum process to streamline the approval of revised and new curriculum. The standard should be that a new course should be able to go through the entire life cycle of conception, proposal, approval, and course scheduling within one

semester. A new program should be able to go through the life cycle within one academic year. Information Technology will develop an electronic curriculum and approval system that encourages early consultation on curriculum across the College, and speedy approval by necessary parties. An electronic curriculum system can enforce a streamlined process. Chokepoints should be eliminated.

- **Faculty** will develop courses and programs that are flexible enough to meet the needs of a changing economy. Faculty will propose courses and programs in technology, allied health, workforce development, and other areas.

- **Advertising** will produce pamphlets and other materials to educate the public about new programs that meet the economic opportunities in the community. They will make new program development and workforce retraining a bigger element of our advertisement. Advertising should also curtail the message that community college is a cheaper alternative for higher education, especially for programs that may result in a longer college career.

- **Admissions** will promote new programs at college fairs and high school visits, distributing materials. They will also provide platforms for faculty and administrators to help promote new programs, giving extended tours of facilities on campus, and providing deeper information about the programs to students who show interest.

- **Counseling and Advising** will identify students who may be interested in new programs. Potential students should be communicated to faculty and administrators. Counseling and Advising will also communicate changes about courses and programs as needed.

- **Student support services** will prepare tutors for new programs and the expectations of faculty teaching the courses.

Parents

Background: Parents are encouraging or even forcing many of their children to attend SCCC against their will, because many high school graduates do not have a full-time jobs or other prospects. Students who attend college against their will are usually unmotivated and unsuccessful. These students are not retained when they and their parents give up after one or more unsuccessful semesters. Current College policy excludes parents from advising sessions and other points of contact with students. We want the student to stand on his or her own, but often, the parent is the person most interested in the education we are offering. On the other hand, parents often have a poor concept of what a community college education entails. We should find more effective ways of including parents in our College.

Goal: To increase the role of parents in the education of our students.

- **Counseling and Advising** will welcome parents in advising sessions with the permission of the student, consistent with FERPA. Advising sessions should incorporate the concerns of students with regard to their parents, giving students room to express possible frustration and

resentment. Advisors should be able to note possible issues with parents in advising notes that can be available to instructors.

- **Faculty** will invite parents to sit in classes with their children to observe the classroom experience. Faculty should be made aware of students who may have issues with parents influencing their decisions to attend college, and they can adjust their teaching accordingly.

- **Advertising** will produce pamphlets and other materials that give parents honest advice about how to encourage their children to pursue a college career that reflects their own motivations and goals.

- **Admissions** will address the concerns of parents and seek to educate them about how best they can support their children.

- The campus will institute **Parents Week** to encourage parents to engage with our students' college experience in more direct ways.

4. Conclusion

Student retention issues should be considered an opportunity to improve the campus as an educational institution. It should be an opportunity for institutional renewal. Because the effects of low enrollment and retention are obvious, everyone recognizes the need to change and improve as an organization. We are fortunate to have faculty, staff, and administrators who are committed to the work of the College, and who are willing to change how we operate. The most necessary reform we can make is to a culture where individuals and groups are expected to work hard but work in isolation. A new culture of teamwork and coordination will help us make the most of our efforts, and to employ our diminished resources as effectively as possible. Teamwork will help eliminate the gaps where our students are not retained.

The history of community college enrollment is marked by high and low points. The decline of the population of potential college students may cause enrollment shortfalls for several years, but enrollment is likely to rebound. The historical driver of community college enrollment has been economic recession. We should not understand the current strong economy as a factor in keeping students away because satisfactory job opportunities are available. Instead, we should anticipate economic recessions as the driving force that increases our enrollment. In times of economic recession, community college enrollment across the country increases at rates that push well past previous high points for institutions. When workers are laid off in high numbers and no jobs are waiting for high school graduates (or even college graduates), community colleges have traditionally been the places where workers go for retraining and skills acquisition. American community colleges are recognized as a unique resource where workers can find hope when times are bleak. No other country in the world has institutions that are capable of absorbing so many workers in need to give them the necessary skills for their next jobs.

As currently constituted, the College is not in a position to receive and educate the next influx of students seeking preparation for the next generation of jobs. Our poor historical rates of student

retention suggest that students do not value their educational experience at SCCC enough to persist until graduation. They are more likely to transfer to more attractive institutions, take jobs and training opportunities that do not require higher education, or simply stop out and do their best in the low-skilled labor market. Our most popular program, Liberal Arts – General Studies, is a flawed refuge for students who want to delay career decisions, or who want to fulfill General Education requirements and accumulate random credits before transferring to their institution of choice. Students who are undecided need more individualized attention than students who already have a plan, but they are placed in a one-size-fits-all program instead. Our most popular job-specific programs are oversubscribed, many of our most useful job programs are obscure to the public, and programs that will prepare students for artificial intelligence, robotics, and other fast-growing sectors that will dominate future job growth are non-existent at the College. Meanwhile, our developmental students continue to struggle with the basic skills of reading, writing, and math that will determine their economic fate.

When College enrollment returns to and exceeds our previous highs, there will be no urgency to renew the institution, and student retention will once again be a problem for the next generation of faculty, staff, and administration. We cannot pass the buck yet again. We must solve the problem now.

5. Addendum: Additional Ideas and Suggestions

- **Focus groups with current students.** We have trouble finding out why students are not retained. Students who do not return to the College do not answer their phones when we call, and they are not forthright about their decisions to stop attending. Current students who are retained, however, are very similar to students who are not. They had to make decisions to return to SCCC that reflect the decisions of students who decide not to return. We should conduct a series of focus groups with current second-year students to explore decision points in their college career when they decided to return for another semester. They can give us insight into why other students decide not to return.

- **Students Development Day.** Patterned on Professional Development Day, we should institute a day or series of days when classes are cancelled to give students equivalent training in how they can be successful in their college career. Programs, student support services, and other campus groups can present to students to help them get the most out of their experience at SCCC. The experience of many on the Committee is that potential students must be given practical demonstrations of our offerings before they will commit to completing their programs of study.

- **Jobs for Students.** If we are to promote the College as a place where students can hold down a job and still go to college, we should try to create an economy within the College or near our campuses where students can find good jobs. They would be able to commute from work to school more easily, and the time between work and school can be spent on campus studying or participating in co-curricular activities. Also, the mission of the community college has always included a contribution to the local economy. The College can fulfil that mission and also directly provide jobs for our students.

- **Financial Aid.** Students consistently cite financial pressure as a factor in their decisions to pursue a college education. Even though our tuition and fees are very low compared to other local institutions, our students seem to live under such marginal economic circumstances that their dependence on financial aid is decisive with regard to their retention. Many students report delays in their college career when their financial aid is delayed, and some of the delays are the result of paperwork errors and missed deadlines. The College should research the circumstances under which students do not receive the financial aid they are entitled to, and we should explore the value of additional financial aid staff who can assist students with paperwork and deadlines. Many colleges will fill out paperwork for their students, and will help them gain necessary signatures and documentation. The College may discover that the increase in enrollment financed by financial aid will offset the cost in additional staff.

- **Curriculum Coordinator.** The campus should create the position of Curriculum Coordinator to facilitate the curriculum process for all departments. The Curriculum Coordinator should receive one class reassigned time to help all faculty and departments in their efforts to update current curriculum and create new courses and programs. The curriculum process is complicated, and the paperwork is confusing. Faculty who have never completed the process or who have never served on curriculum committees often make mistakes in paperwork or process that add many months to what is already a long process. The Curriculum Coordinator should have extensive experience with the curriculum process, as well as requirements from SUNY, the Department of Education, and various assessment processes. The Curriculum Coordinator will not be a permanent position; it should be renewed when there is a demonstrated need in a semester. The Curriculum Coordinator should also be tasked to work with IT to create an electronic curriculum management system. (This position can also be performed by a competent PA.)

- **Track Students Electronically.** The campus should create or adopt an electronic system for tracking students through the admissions and intake process. Potential students routinely fall through the cracks when they are passed from Admissions to Financial Aid to Testing to Counseling to Registrar. An electronic system that allows us to hand off students from one group to another will help the receiving groups anticipate students passed from the previous office. Such a system will also help us analyze where students are lost within the process. Such a system can also be expanded to track a student throughout his or her career at the College, alerting staff when students fail to seek advising and register for the next semester. A Customer Relations Management system (CRM) has been in development at the College that may address this need.

- **Expand the Use of Information Tools for Students and Staff.** Technology will never replace face-to-face contact, and we should work to maintain our sense of physical community, but technology can help fill in gaps where they currently exist. Information and process tools for students and employees should be expanded and streamlined to help keep everyone informed, and to give everyone the ability to perform tasks at a distance. The problems of communication with students and employees can be mitigated by fostering a true online community with practical tools. We should explore the use of artificial intelligence to reduce information overload and anticipate the items that will be most helpful to the user. Better integration of

technology with student and staff processes is especially important for a multi-campus institution. We should also develop a culture where electronic communication is followed up with personal phone calls or other forms of personal contact. A potential student who applies to the College online should receive a quick phone call to follow up and solicit questions. Tools should also be developed to make data more readily available to groups at the College that can put the information to use. Tools are also necessary that can process the data to help users draw conclusions. For example, information about the preferences and goals of incoming students can be made available to faculty developing curriculum to help them anticipate new courses and programs. It can also help admissions, counseling, and advising guide the student through what is available at the College.

- **Revitalize the Liberal Arts and Sciences.** Many studies on the future of jobs available to community college graduates emphasize the skills and knowledge that are inherent in the liberal arts. As automation takes over rote tasks in the workplace, skills like reading, writing, and math become more important for workers. Critical thinking and the ability to think about broad issues in the world become necessary in jobs where they were superfluous before. The demands of citizenship in a connected, technological world where change is constant also require graduates to have more experience with liberal arts and sciences. We should examine the place of the liberal arts at the College in the context of workforce development, citizenship, and the intellectual life in Suffolk County across economic and social strata. The results of the examination should be reflected in curriculum development, advertising, classroom instruction, and other areas of the College.

- **Reconceive Developmental Studies**. We should recognize that the most important skills needed in the workplace are reading, writing, and math. Developmental studies should be reconceived to have more than one purpose. We can teach practical work skills while preparing students for more advanced academics in credit courses and transfer schools. The curriculum for developmental classes can include practical assignments applicable to the workplace, along with traditional academic exercises. Broadening the mandate of transitional studies can help remove the stigma of remediation, and give students a sense of purpose in non-credit classes.

- **One Month Initiatives.** The campus has many challenges in front of us, and many possible ways to address them. We should exercise teamwork and coordination through as many iterations as possible. The administration should establish a set of priorities and schedule a set of initiatives for the 2019-2020 academic year. To help the campus focus on individual initiatives, and to allow the practice of teamwork to pass through several iterations, we should focus on one initiative per month. September can be Curriculum Month. October can be Parents Month. The point would be to give the campus one project for everyone to work on together simultaneously. We would focus on the principles of teamwork to achieve a common goal. Then the next month would give us another project, and we would practice the principles of teamwork yet again. We can designate individual responsibility to continue the project at the end of the month to ensure continued coordination, but the attention of the campus can move on to the next project.