Research exercise: Make It or Break It, You've Only Got Six Weeks: The Effectiveness of a College Readiness Program at For-Profit Colleges

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Purpose of the Study
The current literature about student college readiness focuses mainly on ACT and/or SAT scores as entrance scores. However, students enrolling at Delta Career Education Corporation schools are not required to submit ACT or SAT scores. Instead, they take a Wonderlic skill test and must meet the minimum score of a 15.

There is a void in the current literature addressing college readiness programs aimed at non-traditional students at for-profit colleges warrants the proposed study. The Six Weeks to Success program, now in existence for one year, was assessed to determine its overall effectiveness in preparing students entering Delta Career Education Corporation (DCEC) schools who fail to meet the entrance test cut-off score.

Significance of the Study
Proprietary post-secondary schools need to find a way to better prepare low scoring college students than to just turn them away. Colleges and universities attempt to fill the college readiness gap by offering developmental or remedial courses to enrolled underprepared students. One such remedial program, the Six Weeks to Success (SWTS) program at Delta Career Education Corporation, is designed to prepare low-scoring college students for the rigors of college level courses. A comparative analysis of students who completed the program versus those who did not was completed to determine if the program is meeting the needs of the students.

• For-profit schools serve a majority of non-traditional students 25 years and older who typically are working and going to school at the same time, or taking care of children and other dependent family members (O’Neill et al., 2012).

• This study analyzes the academic success of students who complete the SWTS program compared to those who are not required to complete the program because they meet the established entrance test scores.

• This will determine if the SWTS students are more or less successful than their counterparts who are not required to take the remediation program at all.

What is Six Weeks to Success
Six Weeks to Success (SWTS), was developed by Delta Career Education and instituted in July 2011 as a remediation program designed for anxious test takers who could not pass the minimum entrance test score. The program covers six different topics, one per week, that include:

- Study Skills & Time Management
- Basic Computer Skills
- Writing
- Math
- Problem Solving & Critical Thinking
- Final Group Project

Students are also assigned a mentor who is different from their instructor (DCEC, 2012). The SWTS program is unique because the curriculum and accompanying assignments are intended to cover cognitive and non-cognitive areas to improve students’ experience their first six weeks.

Students are presumably given the tools they need to succeed not only in the classroom but outside of the classroom and increase the likelihood they will make it to graduation.

What the Literature Tells Us
"At-risk" students are those who are admitted to a college or university without the skills needed to complete a degree and may require additional courses or training, otherwise known as "remedial education" or "developmental education" (Mulvey, 2008). Higher education institutions should be committed to providing effective developmental education to at-risk students while balancing costs assumed by the institution with the cost paid for by the student (Michael, Dickson, Ryan, & Koeffer, 2010; Hande, & Williams, 2011).

Much research has been done to show that students required to complete remedial education have lower graduation rates than those who are not required to (Boatman et al., 2011). However, one study compared at-risk students who completed developmental coursework and those who did not and found developmental coursework had a positive effect on student retention and completion rate (Bettinger & Long, 2009).

Remedial and developmental coursework required at many colleges and universities is set-up to teach students the skills that they need to succeed in college but may be contributing to the already high college dropout rate.

The First-Year Experience for college and university freshmen is an essential time for students to become committed to their education and graduation. The key test of the SWTS program is whether or not it has filled the gap for at-risk students during their first experience at the Colleges, or if students who complete this program are no better prepared than typical first-year college students.

Based on the review of literature, the current study tested two basic research hypotheses:

1) The SWTS program will have a positive effect on first-year retention rates.

2) The SWTS program will have a positive effect on students overall cumulative grade point average and completion rate.

References


Methods & Results
The Quantitative study concluded collected data on 1525 students at five randomly selected Delta Career Education Schools. Retention rates were calculated by taking the total population - drops / total population.

1. The SWTS program did have a positive impact on student retention compared to non-SWTS students at some schools.

2. An independent t test failed to reveal the SWTS program had a statistically significant effect on students meeting satisfactory academic progress while enrolled for at least one academic year.

3. An independent t test failed to reveal that day students had a better retention status than night students.

4. An independent t test revealed a statistically significant difference between full-time students and less than full-time enrolled students. Full-time student retention status was more positive than less than full-time students.

5. An independent t test revealed that students who had previously attended college or attained their Associate or Bachelors degree, were more likely to complete three or more terms SAP met.

Conclusions and Suggestions
The results of the study provides opportunities for additional study on the SWTS program and implications on current practices at our schools.

1. Qualitative surveys of SWTS students and non-SWTS students should be done to determine what additional skills are lacking in these students that affect their ability to stay in school and meet SAP.

2. Full-time students were shown to have a better retention rate than students enrolled less than full-time, therefore the school should share this information with prospective students in an attempt to inspire students to enroll full-time.

3. Students who have never attended college before should be considered “at-risk” for meeting satisfactory academic progress and therefore should be provided additional opportunities for tutoring, academic advising, and developmental studies.

4. Additional analysis should be completed the results of this study are also true for students enrolling in diploma or certificate programs that take less time to complete than associate degree programs.