Rend Lake College: Small Changes, Big Impact

by Francena Turner

Rend Lake College (RLC), located in rural southern Illinois, has an extensive history of participation in Pathways to Results (PTR), having taken part in at least one project almost every year since 2011. This brief features the college's second PTR implementation project, with its efforts focused on examining certificate and degree completion rates, particularly for part-time students.

Identifying the Problem

RLC's student population overwhelmingly consists of part-time students, herein defined as students who register for less than 12 hours per semester. Based on RLC's own data, 54% of its students were enrolled part time and 36% were identified as nontraditional by age (NTBA), which encompasses individuals who are 25 or older. Preliminary data showed that part-time and NTBA students completed certificate and degree programs at lower rates than full-time and traditionally aged students. Hence, the PTR team decided to pursue five initiatives that influence several key retention or attrition decisions for these students, essentially strengthening an already comprehensive set of student supports with the entire student body in mind.

RLC's Innovations

The team focused on improving completion rates for part-time students and NTBA students. While there are many reasons why a part-time or NTBA student might not complete his or her initially selected certificate or degree program, the team, which is comprised of key decision makers across programs and administrative departments, used student withdrawal rationales as well as staff experiences to explore the issue. In line with existing literature, a lack of campus engagement and contact time with faculty, as well as time constraints and disjointed course completion, informed low completion rates (Lee, 2018). The initiatives implemented in order of priority are listed below:

- **Mandatory First Year Experience (FYE) Course.** The team took the steps necessary to make RLC's FYE course, previously only a requirement for full-time degree-seeking students, mandatory for part-time degree-seeking students to increase their academic and campus integration. This course introduces students to various campus offices and student supports, and it provides guidance regarding time management and study skills. Students pursuing certificates now take a work-ethics course that, while different from the FYE course, develops soft job skills such as timeliness and workplace decorum.

- **Professional Development for Faculty and Staff.** Faculty and staff will attend professional development training related to their data-management software, which will enable them to better utilize data to compile meaningful reports, find further equity gaps, and evaluate the initiatives discussed herein. Their first such training is complete, and they are pursuing funding to send faculty and staff to relevant success-oriented conferences for students in the future.

- **Extended Student Support-Services Hours.** Various student support and academic offices operated on traditional business hours, which hindered many part-time students' ability to have contact time with academic and financial aid advisers and various support services. The team therefore organized extended evening hours on the second Tuesday of each month. In addition, students are now able to schedule appointments with the Business Office, Financial Aid, Testing and Advising, and referral services, and Tutoring Services is offering extended hours. Students may also work with staff members to schedule additional appointments to make sure their needs are being met. In an effort to give students the best opportunities to use these extended services, the Marketing & Public Information Department created a targeted brochure to be sent to part-time students. This professional brochure replaces a more informal handout that students received only at the time of enrollment.
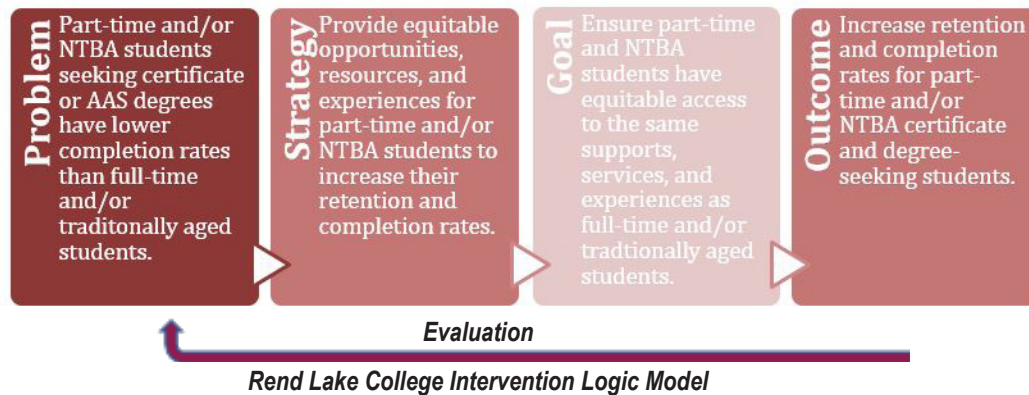
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- **Evening Events.** Student activities organized by RLC staff are traditionally planned during normal business hours. The PTR team has made an effort, however, to offer evening events that mirror day events, which includes a Student Appreciation Night.

- **Part-Time Curriculum Sequences.** In response to data showing disjointed course completion, the PTR team is evaluating certificate and degree programs that have higher numbers of part-time and/or NTBA students. The team members' goal is to construct part-time curriculum sequence models that more actively inform students about which courses to take, and the order in which to take them, thus allowing for proper preemptive planning. At the time of this brief, selected programs included welding, industrial maintenance, medical coding, criminal justice, automotive, graphic design, and office technology.

Mapping the Logic Model

The RLC team realized there are numerous reasons why part-time and/or NTBA students might face difficulty completing their certificate or degree programs. Just as part-time and/or NTBA students are, in many ways, diverse, the team decided to implement a variety of initiatives that were feasible and impactful to meet their targeted students' needs and increase completion rates.

Problem	Strategy	Goal	Outcome
Part-time and/or NTBA students seeking certificate or AAS degrees have lower completion rates than full-time and/or traditonally aged students.	Provide equitable opportunities, resources, and experiences for part-time and/or NTBA students to increase their retention and completion rates.	Ensure part-time and NTBA students have equitable access to the same supports, services, and experiences as full-time and/or tradtionally aged students.	Increase retention and completion rates for part-time and/or NTBA certificate and degree-seeking students.

Evaluation

Rend Lake College Intervention Logic Model

Notes on Scaling and Sustainability

The PTR team posits that the best way to prevent resistance to the previously described initiatives is to show the benefits and positive impact of the suggested changes. When the team is able to make such up-front connections, it helps the rest of the college support and welcome the changes. Further, the team is confident that these initiatives will continue because key decision makers were involved in their planning and implementation. Changes to college policy ensure the continuity of the FYE course mandate for part-time degree-seeking students. As the FYE course already existed, this initiative simply involved an increase in the number of sections offered. Certificate- seeking students are required to take the work-ethics course, in response to RLC's business and industry partner feedback, and there has not been any resistance as the need for such a course is understood as being integral to graduate employability.

Both the FYE and work-ethics course required additional credit hours and are thus sustainable by tuition dollars. The PTR team recognized that the main hindrance to students attending the extended Student Support Services hours was a lack of awareness. To ensure that students knew about this effort, the team embarked on an aggressive and targeted outreach campaign and is hopeful that faculty and staff will allow time for the promotional efforts to take root. With regard to evening events, student participation will guide the amount and kind of future programming offered. The part-time curriculum sequences will initially focus on certificate and degree programs heavily populated by part-time and/or NTBA students, but the team plans to work on eventually scaling them to all of RLC's certificate and degree programs.

Notes on Evaluation

The PTR team will make use of expanded end-of-course surveys and data reports in an effort to creating cohorts to monitor through certificate and/or degree completion. In addition, professional development workshop evaluations, student sign-in sheets for extended student-support hours and evening events, and faculty and adviser surveys on the utility of the part-time curriculum sequence will inform evaluation efforts. One of the initiatives—professional development with regard to data-management software—will require more time before full evaluation can be conducted.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge RLC's co-team leaders Kristina Shelton, Perkins Coordinator, and Margo Wagner, the director of Community & Corporate Education, whose thoughtful reflections recorded through blogs, interviews, and on-campus meetings contributed to this strategy brief.

References

Lee, N.E. (2018). The part-time student experience: Its influence on student engagement, perceptions, and retention. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, 30*(1), 1-18.

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