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Grant helps freshmen find success

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

Many incoming freshmen are undecided about which major to declare or what career path to choose. The lack of decisiveness can be compounded when a student comes from an economically or academically disadvantaged background or enters college with a grade point average less than 3.0. Nearly 55 percent of freshmen entering OU with these criteria are placed on academic probation after their first academic year.

To help these students, Oakland University's **Office of Equity** and Advising Resource Center implemented the Students First program last fall, which allows freshmen to develop strategies for academic success; establish strong relationships with faculty, staff and campus leaders; and explore majors and career options.

The Michigan Department of Career Development King-Chavez-Parks Initiative awarded an \$84,920 grant to OU to establish the program, which offers support services for freshmen who are most at-risk of going on academic probation. The grant period is from Oct. 1, 2002, to Sept. 30, 2003, and is renewable for five years.

The main component of the program is the College Student Inventory (CSI), a questionnaire developed by the Noel-Levitz Retention Management System, a leading authority on student retention. Students respond to various questions on a five-point scale, which helps indicate their academic preparedness, study skills and social interests. The completed inventories and subsequent advising and support services can help students succeed academically and prepare for a career.

"We feel that all incoming freshmen are at risk of struggling in their first semester and possibly going on academic probation," said Gloria Sosa, director of the Office of Equity. "The CSI is an instrument that has been used for many years and is successful at identifying the needs of freshmen. It reports on academic motivation and their level of social interaction, identifies those who may be prone to drop out, and gives an indication of how well they will make the adjustment from high school to college."

The CSI was administered last fall to 105 freshmen in six targeted sections of Collegiate Communication (COM 101), a one-credit course that helps students learn the value of a college education, become aware of campus resources, develop relationships with their peers and begin planning for their careers. Of the students who took the CSI, 97 percent said it was helpful.

"Completing the inventory gives students a voice in their future and allows them to connect to a peer or mentor who can help guide them," said Sosa. "Students are assigned to a mentor through the Office of Equity, and they meet once a week to talk about adjustment issues."

The Students First program is expected to grow as the office administers the CSIs to targeted freshmen next fall and continues to monitor students who have already participated in the program, said Vanessa Bard, assistant director of the Advising Resource Center.

"It's very important that we use this program to target students who are most at-risk of going on academic probation because those students tend not to seek out assistance," said Bard, who co-wrote the grant proposal with Sosa.

"We intend to expand upon this program in several ways," Sosa said. "This year we have eight faculty members who act as mentors to the students. We want to expand that to provide additional academic support, preferably within their major. Our goal is to give students who are most at-risk of being placed on academic probation an opportunity to invest in their future. Afterwards, we will continue to provide them with support services throughout their academic careers."

For more information on student support programs at Oakland University, visit the **Office of Equity** Web site.

SUMMARY

Oakland University's Office of Equity and Advising Resource Center implemented the Students First program last fall, which allows freshmen to develop strategies for academic success; establish strong relationships with faculty, staff and campus leaders; and explore majors and career options. The Michigan Department of Career Development King-Chavez-Parks Initiative awarded an \$84,920 grant to OU to establish the program.

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