Abstract

State and national programs such as Completion by Design, Achieving the Dream, and SuccessNC are leading to an increased emphasis on student completion driven in part by President Obama’s 2020 goal to increase degree attainment from 40 to 60% (Kanter, Ochoa, Nassif, & Chong; 2011). As a result, community colleges must adopt policies that continue to foster student success and promote retention while ensuring that quality education and services are provided. Anticipating legislation, the North Carolina Community College System is moving toward a performance-based funding model to address these issues. The open-door mission will be challenged as greater emphasis is placed on completion rates rather than mere enrollment numbers. To address these challenges, the Isothermal Community College Development Team engaged in intensive research to identify barriers to student completion and best practices to help students overcome common hurdles. Through the research process, the development team recommended a strengthened entry and progression process for students. The “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” initiative educates, engages and empowers first-time college students to achieve successful college completion through comprehensive educational planning. This is achieved through mandatory orientation, proactive advising, and mandatory registration into a student success course within the first two semesters.