



Mentor Case Study: Santa Fe College

Gainesville, Florida

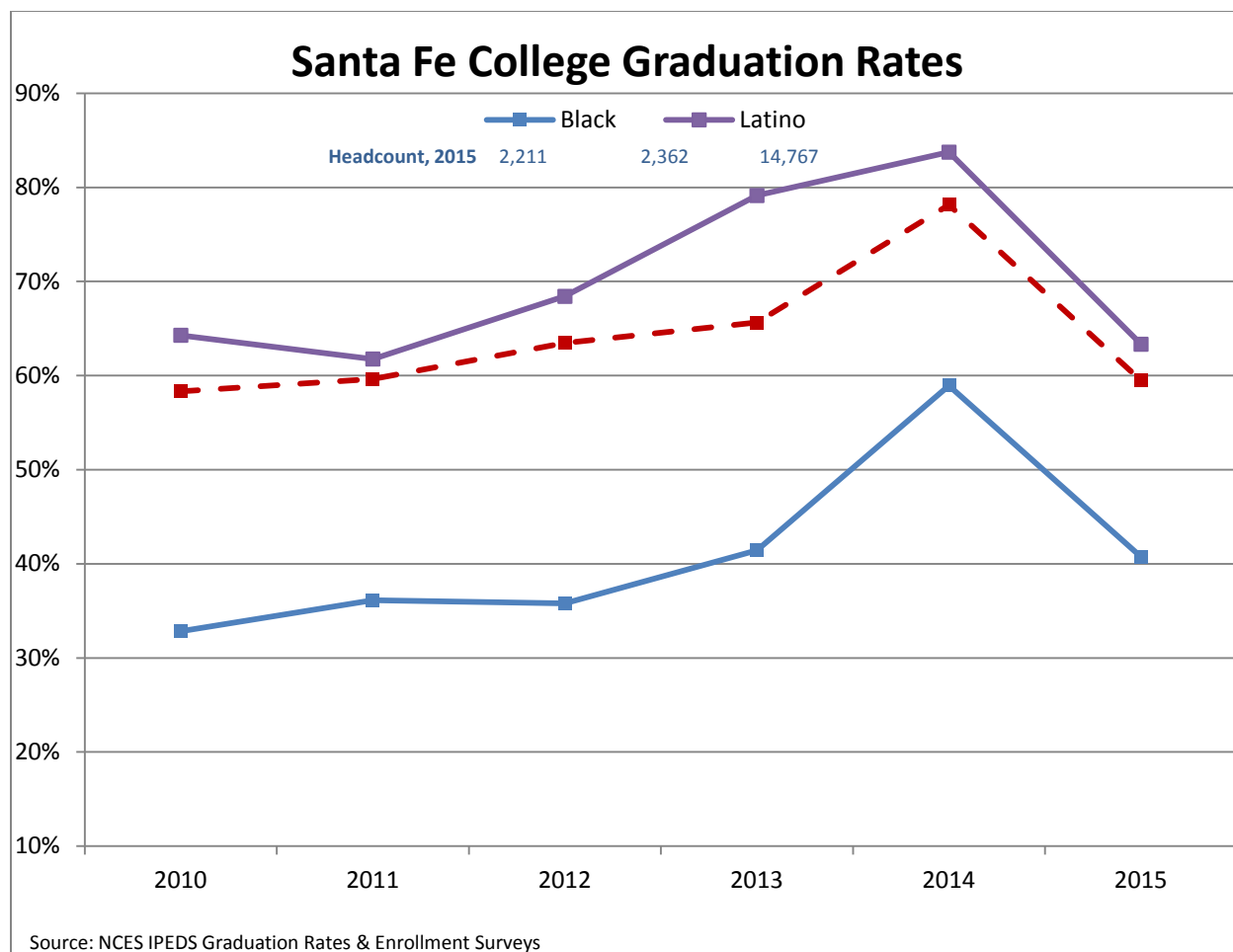
Overview of Santa Fe College

Santa Fe College is a comprehensive community college in Gainesville, Florida, enrolling some 22,000 students per year (annual unduplicated headcount; about 12,000 FTE). Approximately 66% of the college's students are enrolled in the university-transfer A.A. degree with the goal of transferring to the nearby University of Florida or another institution in the state university system. Roughly the other third are enrolled in certificate and degree programs in career and technical education, and the college has built especially strong programs in the health sciences, information technology, building construction, public safety, and biotechnology programs, with graduates going on to earn wages that exceed the average for our region. The college enrolls almost 1,000 students annually in high school dual enrollment programs, and just under 5% of the college's overall FTE (600-800 students) continue at Santa Fe to pursue one of nine specifically authorized and workforce-oriented baccalaureate programs.

Because of its close transfer relationship with the University of Florida, almost half of Santa Fe's students come from outside its two-county service district. Thousands of students enroll annually from Florida's major population centers (the Miami, Orlando, Jacksonville, and Tampa/St. Pete metro areas), as well as suburban and rural counties from throughout Florida. While this influx of students from around the state makes the population of Santa Fe look much more traditional than many community colleges (our average student age is 24), it also brings tremendous diversity and a higher percentage of Black and Hispanic students than is present in the college's local service area. Currently, almost 40% of Santa Fe students are minorities, with approximately 20% identifying Hispanic origin and 19% African-American.

Data Trend Chart

The chart below represents Santa Fe College's graduation trends for Black students (blue line), Latino students (purple line), and for all students (red) over five years.



How did Santa Fe College get started on the “student success” path?

President Jackson Sasser became president of Santa Fe College in 2002, and the college is fortunate to have had conscientious leadership that for almost two decades has emphasized student success, well before the national conversation regarding completion gained traction. As a Board college leading the League for Innovation in the Community College, as a longtime participant in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, and through involvement with other national organizations, the culture of Santa Fe was already involved with national conversations regarding the completion agenda. The college was also fortunate, in a way, to be closely linked to a university that, for its own reasons, began requiring the A.A. degree for all transfer students around 2005, making degree progression and completion a key outcome that was well understood by all employees of the college.

Around that time, facing persistent performance gaps between white and African-American male students, President Sasser and the college committed resources to starting and maintaining a permanent coaching and mentoring program for African-American men called "My Brother's Keeper." The program's goal was to support black men from the time they first entered the college all the way through graduation, and the program represented an intentional commitment of institutional resources with the goal of closing an equity gap and improving outcomes for a

specific population. Since then, the college has begun programs dedicated to supporting Hispanic students and GED earners.

When the Great Recession began having a tremendous impact on Florida (c. 2007-2011), the conversation about student success took on much greater urgency. Virtually every conversation with a Santa Fe student revealed a case where someone had lost a job, a family had been displaced, earlier workforce training was no longer needed or relevant, and retraining or new education was needed.

Building on that urgency, the Aspen Institute for Community College Excellence also embraced the completion agenda (as well as an equity agenda) in a way that newly energized two-year colleges beginning around 2011. Aspen's four-part rubric for institutional success (student learning, student outcomes, equity outcomes, and workforce outcomes) led Santa Fe to recommit itself to an outcomes-based vision of institutional excellence.

How does Santa Fe College sustain the student success movement?

The college sustains its orientation towards student success in several ways. First, in hiring both administrators and faculty, the college endeavors to select candidates who understand the importance of student outcomes. Second, in its programming, the college continues to pursue initiatives that keep student success at the front of the institution's primary concerns. For example, since 2013, the college's SACS-required QEP has been focused on improving our student intake and orientation systems, instituting developmental advising (rather than just transactional course selection), giving faculty new resources to communicate early alerts to all students when they are getting off track, and introducing mindset interventions that can be used by faculty and advisors at any time. For another example, in competing for a new Title III grant, the college focused attention on the success of students in a variety of developmental and gateway courses and used the (mixed) results of those courses as impetus for improvement.

What is the role of the leadership?

The President, the Provost, and the academic leadership team regularly use student success as an indicator of program success. Conversations about enrollment management and learning must carry through to a focus on student completion, as well as equitable completion for all students. Increasingly, the entire leadership team (both in student affairs and academic affairs) is comfortable articulating the institutional mission in terms of a success agenda, as well as confronting those barriers that may hinder students from completion. Increasingly, too, all leadership carry responsibility for continuing a conversation about equity; while many of our minority students are performing well (Hispanic students during some years outpacing white students), the performance gap between African-American students and other groups remains persistently poor.

What is the role of culture change?

Culture does not stand still at Santa Fe. Whether because of seemingly annual legislative mandates that have changed developmental education and general education, whether because we have a robust culture of innovation and grant writing that seeks new opportunities and challenges; whether because we have successfully recruited faculty and

staff committed to the idea of constantly improving rather than maintaining the status quo-- the Santa Fe culture has embraced an ethos of continuous improvement. Like many institutions, we sometimes experience initiative fatigue (currently, for example, we are involved with three far-reaching grants and multiple facilities projects, all happening at the same time), but the culture of Santa Fe has proven itself to be resilient and adaptable.

What institutional data is used to drive efforts?

- Internally, we find that program-level data about student retention and success is helpful for identifying those areas where students are making good progress through their chosen programs of study and others where students regularly encounter difficulty. Often, such metrics require combination with some qualitative analysis to determine why specific “loss points” exist. (Not all are related to poor instruction or lack of student progression.)
- We use same-semester retention and grade distribution data at the course and instructor level and can compare that data to discipline and departmental averages to identify areas of instructional strength and weakness. This data is required to be incorporated into pre- and post-tenured faculty evaluations.
- Our success data is accompanied by robust student learning outcome assessment data in virtually all programs, assuring that direct and indirect measures of student knowledge and skills development are in place, and that the emphasis on student success doesn’t lead thoughtlessly to grade inflation or reduction in academic standards.
- We have begun looking more closely at fall-to-fall retention among our FTIC cohort and are attempting to generate predictive models of scenarios in which students are most likely to stop out of attendance.
- We produce an annual equity report that provides more granular data on overall student retention and completion by race and ethnicity, as well as success and performance gaps in gateway courses (especially in English and math), and we formulate action plans each year based on the previous year’s results.

How were challenges overcome?

To be sure, the college has experienced the usual challenges involved with culture change: uncertainty that the work involved with change will lead to better results; the onboarding of new technology; and trying to find ways to “work smarter” rather than overloading already busy employees. But the chief way in which the college addressed all these challenges has been through a culture of open transparency and the desire to keep the student’s experience and success at the heart of institutional conversations.

The college continues to struggle with the persistent gap between African-American students and their white and Hispanic peers. Although it is encouraging that the performance gap has narrowed in recent years, the interventions the college currently has in place have not yet erased a significant gap.

Knowing what you know now, what would Santa Fe College do differently?

No response provided.

Advice for those just starting the student success journey?

My advice would be to ground the need for institutional improvement of student success and equity in terms that connect to real-world circumstances. Many of our students struggle with poverty, obtaining a living wage, developing effective labor market skills, and equitable access to educational and financial opportunity. As educators, we have a moral imperative to make education responsive to the needs of our citizens and our communities. I would say this work requires a measure of personal and professional courage to "call the question" on whether our current practices are effective or yield results we are satisfied with. Many of our community college students in particular show tremendous courage by enrolling in higher education, when education has not necessarily been their lifelong friend. The least we can do as educators is been brave enough to ensure that the experience we offer meets their needs.

Finally, I would suggest to those just getting started that the "data is your friend." As educators, we are not necessarily trained in analytics or business data, and some of us might prefer the anecdote or the feel of the interactive educational process over measuring the outcomes. However, to create momentum for change, data about the numbers of students who are successful or unsuccessful—especially when combined with moving anecdotes that bring the reality of a student's experience to life—can create add weight and urgency to what might otherwise be a one-off story.