

MCC program eases students' transition to college life

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By Alexandria Nelson, Special to Tribune |

In order to increase retention rates among first-generation Mesa Community College students, a new program this semester paired students with staff mentors to help ease their transition to college life.

The program is MCC President Shouan Pan's response to President Obama's 2009 challenge to increase college completion rates, according to MCC executive assistant Janet Felton.

Students who are enrolled in developmental English or math classes at MCC are eligible to be in the program on a volunteer basis. Once a student agrees to be in the program, they are paired with a MCC staff member to be their mentor.

The results of the program have been positive. In the first semester of the program last fall semester, 149 of the students eligible for the program participated, and at the end of the semester the participants had a 74 percent completion rate for developmental English, compared to the 55 percent completion rate for students who did not participate. In developmental math, Connect 4 Success participants had a 60 percent completion rate compared to a 30 percent completion rate for students who did not participate.

"I wanted to join the program because I was a brand new student and I had a lot of questions about school," said MCC student Yolanda Loera.

Like the students, the MCC staff members volunteer to be a part of the program. The mentors are assigned up to two students at a time, which allows them to give the students the attention that they need during their first semesters at MCC. The mentors meet with the students at least six times a semester and help them with all aspects of college life, from helping the students find information about financial aid to helping them be more involved in MCC student life by joining clubs.

"First, I like to take them on a tour of the campus. I show them all the services that MCC has to offer. I also show them the kind of clubs and activities that we have on a campus," said Sue Blackwell, Connect 4 Success mentor and coordinator. "A lot of students come in not even knowing what we have to offer."

Aside from helping the students navigate through their academic life, the mentors also help the students in their personal lives, creating more than just a mentorship but creating a friendship and support system between the student and the mentor. Some of the mentors have helped students discover learning disabilities, learn time management skills and even helped students find employment within MCC. The mentors are also quick to help when they don't have an answer to something.

"Different mentors have different strengths, so if they can't personally help with something, they can at least point the student in the right direction," said Pam Schuler, a former mentor in the Connect 4 Success program.

"I would encourage students to be a part of the mentoring program because you can learn a lot of skills. The mentors give you a lot of information," said Loera.

The future of the program seems bright and the responses from both the mentors and students have been positive. Most of the mentors and students find the program to be very rewarding and helpful. Mentors are reporting that many students who aren't even eligible to be in the program would like to be a part of it.

"I love mentoring students; if that could be my full-time job, it would be. You get a chance to get to know the students." said Blackwell. "I find the experience to be very rewarding."

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