CASE STUDY

College & Career Success helps South Mountain Community College with First-Year Experience

South Mountain Community College provides quality higher education for a diverse community. Serving an estimated 4,700 students, South Mountain focuses on general education courses, transfer programs, occupational education and career development, continuing education, developmental studies and English as a second language, academic support and student services.

Drawing students from the south Phoenix, AZ community, South Mountain students represent a diverse population, with more than 75 percent identifying as a minority and some 70 percent as first-generation college students. An estimated 70 percent of South Mountain students test into one or more of the institution’s developmental education courses.
Student success has long been a priority for South Mountain. Early efforts were comprised of a series of printed handouts and YouTube videos with a minimal focus on personal development or personal assessments.

The next phase of their first-year experience (FYE) program integrated vocational exploration and major selection with a 360 assignment that merged student results from Human eSources' Do What You Are® (now called AchieveWORKS® Personality) and The PEPS Learning Style Inventory™ (now called AchieveWORKS® Learning & Productivity) with Gallup’s StrengthsFinder™. This enabled the student to create a profile of professions that met their interests, personality and “Signature Themes” (related talents).

In 2017, South Mountain implemented College & Career Success, a comprehensive FYE course focused on a broad range of factors that increase student success, including personal development assessments, time management skills, personal health and wellness, and career development. Today College & Career Success forms the basic curriculum for South Mountain’s CPD 150 course — a required, 3-credit paid course for an estimated 1,000 first-year students — focused on Student Success Initiative (SSI) cohorts at the institution. It is fully integrated into South Mountain’s Canvas learning management system, or LMS.

“Today, we’ve taken our first-year college success program to another level to include career planning and resume workshops,” says Spring Turner, a South Mountain faculty counselor. “College & Career Success supports our students’ independent study activities too. They have time for study and self-reflection before they come to class.”

This comprehensive approach was selected to address the whole student, regardless of their academic history, and to address the broad range of skills needed for success in school, their career, and life. According to Jason Reif, counseling division chair at South Mountain, “College & Career Success works for all of our students … regardless of how prepared for college they are. We have found that exposure to the curriculum really gets students motivated … and accelerates their progress. Plus, the program serves a dual purpose… Students not only discover who they are and develop goals, they also learn how to navigate learning our management system.”

The results of implementing College & Career Success have satisfied South Mountain’s expectations, with 90 percent of students who passed the course returning the following semester and 75 percent returning the following year.

Students find College & Career Success valuable too. “We received an email from an entering student that is pretty typical,” explains Reif. “She reached out to us before she entered the class, saying that she was skeptical about the course and the fact that it was required of all students. She entered our program, and one step led to another on her journey of self-discovery, and now she’s confident in her plan and excited about her classes.”

When asked to provide advice for institutions considering implementing their own version of an FYE program, Reif offers the following advice: “You should have a dedicated technology infrastructure in place, including IT and e-learning staff, at the table. And you need to have the dedicated resources to deliver content to students. The Human eSources staff backing us up has been really helpful. They respond quickly and really care how our students are progressing.”

Turner adds, “Make sure you incorporate book cost as part of the course fees. It avoids excuses for not having the book. You don’t want them to fall behind in their very first class.”