

CASE STUDY

At the College of Southern Idaho, CollegeScope students find their purpose and persist.



Much of the focus on First-Year Experience (FYE) programs is on increasing student persistence, especially with first-generation or underserved students. However, FYE programs can play a more significant role with students as Merry Olson, Career Services Coordinator at College of Southern Idaho (CSI), has found.

CSI, located in Twin Falls, serves a diverse base of 6,900 students, 49 percent of whom are taking courses for dual credit. The college also serves a large population of first-generation college students, along with a sizable Hispanic cohort.



CSI's multi-faceted GNED 101 is offered as a paid, for-credit course. Unlike most FYE courses, the curriculum is structured around various themes relating to the interests of students. The career exploration theme, titled Do Who You Are, is based on the CollegeScope FYE curriculum. Many of the students taking this course are college students, while the others are high school students who are taking it for dual credit.

A good part of student effort in the course involves discovering who they are. "I encourage all my students to view the world as a big jigsaw puzzle, and then use the Do Who You Are course to see how their piece fits into the bigger puzzle," says Olson. "They discover how their strengths and weaknesses give purpose—for themselves and those around them in their careers."

This GNED 101 section is delivered in a hybrid format, allowing students to work independently and then meet as a group face-to-face. Olson and her students believe this format provides the right balance of individual introspection with building group support and appreciation of student differences.

Given the high proportion of dual credit students in CSI's GNED 101 Do Who You Are, the course also plays a crucial role in helping students transition from local high schools to the college. "This course can have as much value for an 18-year-old as it does for a 50-year-old, because it is about helping each person find their unique purpose and then connect it to their educational and career directions," explains Olson.

When it comes to student persistence, GNED 101 has generated an impressive track record as well. According to Olson, GNED 101 Do Who You Are students experience an average increase in retention of 32 percent compared to students who do not attend the course.

"I think the reason students are more likely to persist is they discover who they are and the connecting thread that will give them purpose to achieve their goals," Olson says. "For example, I had one student who explored two seemingly divergent career goals: a nurse practitioner or a parole officer. When I quizzed him about his goals, he told me they both served his purpose or thread [of] connecting him to the world ... to be a healer."

Olson points out that the reflective journaling sessions in the course are essential to students discovering their unique strengths and appreciating how this can help with understanding their purpose.

"I tell all my students there is no wrong answer to who they are," she says. "It is how they use their unique strengths and weaknesses in life that makes the world picture complete."



Merry Olson