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08/28/2009 - EIU Considers Students Success Center a Success for the University

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Aug-28-2009

Eastern Illinois University's Student Success Center was considered an institutional success even before construction of the facility it is housed in was completed.

Three years ago, the U.S. Department of Education awarded Eastern a five-year \$1.8 million institutional development grant, designed to expand student support services and establish a Student Success Center for students at risk of academic failure. The money was also to help fund the physical expansion of facilities to house such a center.

The fact that Eastern received the grant was, in itself, a major victory.

"It really was quite remarkable in that an institution seldom receives funding on its first submission of this type of grant application," said Jeff Cross, associate vice president for academic affairs and project director.

The application was the result of a two-year planning process, which included open university forums, site visits to another university, and much discussion and revision by a 20-member local committee. The entire university community had opportunity for feedback.

More than half of the \$1,825,000 went toward a 5,000-square-foot expansion of Eastern's Ninth Street Hall, which houses the Center for Academic Support and Achievement. The Student Success Center joins three other CASA units -- the Academic Advising Center, Academic Assessment and Testing, and Disability Services.

Construction work, which was completed in early Summer 2009, provided the Student Success Center with its own office and operations/meeting space, as well as three classrooms. An elevator was installed as part of the addition, making all units and all three building levels accessible and "significantly expanding the usefulness of the building," Cross said.

As construction was taking place, the university simultaneously set about developing the Student Success Center's programming component.

In Fall 2007, while working in temporary office space at Eastern's McAfee Gymnasium, Assistant Director Cindy Boyer and her staff began developing and offering the specific services needed to further assist the 700 to 900 undergraduate students annually whose academic performance places them on academic warning (cumulative grade point average below 2.00 on a 4.00 scale).

"Eastern has an excellent record of retaining and graduating its students, ranking well above average among regional comprehensive universities by these measures," said Blair Lord, provost and vice president for academic affairs. "As a comprehensive university, however, Eastern's mission includes providing access to higher education for a broad range of students, including a significant number of students with some variability in their academic preparation. Responding to the needs of this broad range of students requires various support services to ensure their success.

"In short, we are good at what we do, but we want to continue to get better. And this grant has helped us to do so," he added.

A key component to the Student Success Center's accomplishments was, and continues to be, a mandatory one-credit-hour intervention course ("Strategies for Academic Success"), required of all undergraduate students who first go on academic warning. Additionally, the center provides individualized consultations for students who are either referred or come "self-referred" to the center for assistance with time management, test-taking, study habits, note-taking, goal-setting and faculty relations.

It did not take long for Boyer and her staff to begin seeing the fruits of their labor.

A goal of the center, as outlined in the grant application, was to increase the percentage of students who regain "good standing" status after being placed on academic warning from 34 percent (pre-grant level) to 60 percent by 2011.

That objective was surpassed in the center's first year of operation. According to Boyer, 51 percent of students had regained good standing the same semester they enrolled in "Strategies for Academic Success." By the semester following course enrollment, that number had risen to 69 percent. And 92 percent regained good standing two semesters following their course enrollment.

"We were very pleasantly surprised," Cross said. "We've already exceeded the goal we set in the grant and we're only in the third year of a five-year project."

Other features of Eastern's Student Success Center include a parallel online presence, or website, which is a "one-stop shop" for students and faculty to access the tools they need to be successful in college, Boyer said. Located at <http://www.eiu.edu/~success/>, the site provides support for students who need referrals to specific programs already in place on campus and allows faculty to utilize a Student Referral Network when they think a student would benefit from additional support.

RIBBON-CUTTING CEREMONY PLANNED

A ceremonial ribbon-cutting will take place at 8:30 a.m. Friday, Sept. 4, 2009, to celebrate the opening of Eastern Illinois University's Student Success Center.

An open house will follow until noon, with tours available. The center is located in Ninth Street Hall, located southeast of the Tarble Arts Center and west of Greek Court.

The university welcomes all who are interested in attending.