

Ask & Connect in Practice

Brandon, a Student Entering Community College from High School





Activity 1a: Identifying Opportunities for Engaging Individual Students

Instructions: Please read the first two vignettes below. The first vignette describes an experience from the student's perspective, and the second describes the same experience from the college's perspective. Afterward, discuss the prompts and take inventory of your questions, ideas, and concerns. This student vignette is based on several years of research conducted at CCRC.

Student Experience

Brandon is a new student entering college for the first time. Having heard about community college from a presentation at his high school, he decides to enroll after graduating. He hopes to get his associate degree before transferring to a four-year university. Brandon isn't quite sure what he wants to major in, but his favorite classes in high school were history, wood shop, and physics. He also enjoys skateboarding and playing video games. He is hoping to work a bit while going to school and doesn't want college to take over his life. He isn't very motivated to go to school, but his mom and dad think it will be best for him long term to get a bachelor's degree, and they think community college is a good way to save money. Most of his friends are directly enrolling into the local four-year university and don't have to worry about money or tuition costs as much as he does. Brandon sometimes still considers applying for the four-year university directly and taking out loans, as he doesn't want to feel behind. Right now, Brandon is working a minimum-wage retail job and hopes to get promoted to manager to make a bit more money to help him pay for college.

In his first semester at college, Brandon is placed in co-requisite college English and co-requisite college math, for 6 credits each. Not taking a course Brandon is truly interested in gives him a bad impression of the college from the start. No one asks Brandon about his goals and interests, and he feels anonymous on campus. Brandon also doesn't make many friends in his courses and misses the sense of community his friends seem to be having at the four-year university. On top of this, Brandon feels a bit overwhelmed to be taking 12 credits, and his classes are often at times that conflict with his work schedule, making balancing it all challenging. His advisor suggested that he take an online career-interest assessment to provide him with more academic direction, but after finishing the assessment, Brandon wasn't sure how to interpret the results. Still worried about money and wondering if the expense of college is worth it, Brandon begins looking at changing careers in the short term. After reaching out to his high school wood shop teacher, Brandon gets an entry-level job at



a carpentry firm and enjoys learning more technical skills. Brandon thinks about stopping out of school for now and trying to enter directly into a four-year university once he has saved up a bit more money with his new job. The entry-level position at the carpentry place doesn't pay very much more than his retail job, but Brandon is hopeful that taking some time off will help him figure out what he wants to do.

College Perspective

Brandon becomes another instance of the low retention rates for the first semester of college, but the college itself is confused about why students like Brandon leave so often. Though his instructors liked having him in class, he became less engaged as the semester progressed, and they wished there was something more they could have done to reach him. However, already saddled with a heavy teaching load, his instructors did not feel they could have taken more time to reach out to him or any other student that appeared disengaged.

His advisor also felt that he could not have done more to help Brandon, as Brandon was required to take his co-requisite courses, and there was no room in his schedule for classes that aligned with his interests, especially because of his work schedule. The advisor wishes that there was something else that he could have done to help Brandon and is worried about Brandon's likelihood to return to the college, especially given that Brandon talked about trying to go directly to a four-year. Brandon didn't talk very highly of his experience in class and with the college community, and his advisor felt overloaded with many students to advise.

Discussion Questions


1. What missed opportunities or areas of disconnect did you observe in the vignettes?
2. Thinking about your own college, why do many students struggle to navigate and/or not use various student support services?

Activity 1b: Turning Individual Engagement into Universal Support

Instructions: Please read the "Alternative Experience" vignette to imagine how the principles of Ask-Connect could have been used to better support Brandon. Afterward, discuss the prompts and take inventory of your questions, ideas, and concerns.

Alternative Experience

The college implements a practice of making it everyone's responsibility to Ask and Connect with students. From his first meeting with the advisor, he is asked about his interests and goals, and his advisor helps him pick a first-semester "light-the-fire



course." Brandon is placed into corequisite English in his first term and plans to take corequisite math in the second term. His first-semester plan now includes a one-credit student success course and a three-credit history course, which is one of Brandon's areas of interest. His advisor also connects him with a warm handoff to the Student Resource Center, where Brandon connects with a peer mentor who is also interested in history and skateboarding. Brandon talks with his mentor about history and what it's like to study history at the college. Brandon and his mentor also take a walk through the physics department, and Brandon stops to speak to a professor in the department about what studying physics might look like at the college. Finally, in a follow-up meeting with his advisor, Brandon discusses plans for transferring to a four-year university. In a writing assignment in his co-requisite English course, Brandon is prompted to think about his interests and is assigned to interview someone in his field of interest about their work and the different pathways associated with the degree. Brandon feels motivated to continue in college from the start, particularly after hearing about the possibility of exploring historical artifacts and structural restoration. After three years, he graduates with an associate degree in history and successfully transfers to his local four-year with an eye on graduate studies.

Discussion Questions

1. How could Ask-Connect practices be used to create a different experience for the student? What questions would you ask the student?
2. Thinking about your college, in what ways might you be able to integrate Ask and Connect practices to provide a coordinated support network, rather than sending students to a variety of isolated/stand-alone services?
3. What existing practices and resources at your college could you draw from to implement your ideas for asking and connecting the student?
4. How would you know students are accessing the new Ask and Connect practices and that they're having a positive impact on new students?