Achieving the Dream (AtD) is an initiative sponsored by a number of national educational policy-oriented organizations and designed to increase student achievement at community colleges. It is comprised of 102 community colleges across the United States. In an effort to address historically disadvantaged student groups in particular, the initiative focuses on improving success rates for at-risk students including first-generation, low-income, academically underprepared, and minority students. Participating colleges promote AtD’s ultimate goal of increased transfer and graduation rates by zeroing in on critical student success benchmarks such as successful course completion, increased progress from developmental courses to credit courses, and persistence from one semester to the next. The recommended process is for participating colleges to study data on student outcomes, identify areas for improvement, and pursue research-based methods of increasing student success. Colleges who are members of the consortium share information about methods for engaging the college community and successful strategies for improving outcomes. Over the five-year period of involvement in the initiative, it is expected that colleges will be transformed in ways that promote continuous evaluation of student outcomes and data-driven decision-making.

Analysis of Key NOVA Data

Northern Virginia Community College became a member of this initiative in 2007-08. During NOVA’s first year in AtD, campus teams were assembled to study student data and develop strategies for change. Based on quantitative data and faculty and student input, initial areas for intervention were identified. A significant issue identified by student focus groups was lack of information about entering college. These groups recommended that the college develop a comprehensive student orientation to address this need. Additionally, students indicated that lack of preparation for college (e.g., poor study skills, poor time management and lack of understanding of expectations for college) were barriers to student success. Faculty input supported the need for a comprehensive student orientation and for student development of non-academic college skills. Based on this analysis, the development of a First Year Experience Program which includes a comprehensive New Student Orientation (NSO) and a revised student success course - Student Development (SDV) 100 - was recommended as a strategy for increased student persistence and success.

Eight courses have been identified as courses with high enrollment but relatively low success rates and thus, they have been labeled “gatekeeper courses.” They are: ACC 211, BIO 101, ENG 3, ENG 111, MTH 3, MTH 4, MTH 151, and MTH 163. Three of these courses (MTH 3, MTH 4 and ENG 3) are developmental education courses. Additionally, specific gatekeeper courses were identified for the Extended Learning Institute and the Medical Education Campus.
MTH 3 was identified as the initial focus of NOVA’s AtD efforts to increase progress from developmental courses to credit courses. Between 2004 and 2007, 71-75% of NOVA students who took the math placement test were referred to developmental math courses. The largest percentage of referrals and highest enrollment were for MTH 3 (Algebra I). For the 2004 baseline cohort, the success rate for MTH 3 was only 38%. Focus groups of MTH 3 students highlighted lack of student effort (e.g., lack of homework completion and practice to mastery), poor attendance, poor study skills and high levels of math anxiety as factors in poor performance. Based on this data and best practices for developmental education, the initial recommendation was for the development of student learning communities, pairing MTH 3 with SDV 100.

**Strategies**

During 2008-2009 (the first year of implementation), a New Student Orientation (NSO) was developed and components were piloted during summer 2008. During summer 2009, the complete NSO was implemented in 46 sessions across the college. The student success course (SDV 100) was also revised, based on best practices. The initial strategy for MTH 3 was the implementation of a pilot program in fall 2008, pairing four MTH 3/SDV 100 classes in learning communities. In spring 2009, nine MTH3/SDV100 learning communities were implemented.

Year two of implementation (2009-10) will include the continuation and evaluation of MTH 3/SDV 100 learning communities, as well as the identification of additional strategies for MTH 3. Supplemental Instruction will be added as a strategy to some learning communities and to some independent MTH 3 classes. The outcomes of the full NSO, implemented during summer 2009, will be evaluated. The revised SDV 100 course has been implemented (Fall 2009) and results will be analyzed. In addition, interventions for ELI and MEC courses will be evaluated. Data for developmental English and other gatekeeper courses will be analyzed and strategies developed. Professional Development opportunities and campus activities to inform the college community will continue.

**Outcomes**

According to OIR Research Note No. 2 (February 2009), 2,041 students attended the NSO pilot sessions during summer 2008 with 1,510 of these students registering for the fall semester. Based on data from these pilots, students who attended the student orientations had higher rates of persistence from fall 2008 to spring 2009 than students who did not attend NSO. Retention rates of NSO participants were compared to all first-time NOVA students. Results indicate that 85.7% of NSO attendees returned in the spring compared to 67.8% of all first-time NOVA students. When the data are disaggregated, the results show higher retention rates for all ethnic groups, for the target age group of students 18-21, for male and female students, and for both full-time and part-time students. While more data and further analysis are required, the data suggest NSO is related to increased persistence from fall to spring. Overall, there was no difference in GPA for students who attended the NSO and all first-time NOVA students. However, when the data are disaggregated, GPA for Asian, Black and Hispanic NSO attendees is higher than for students from these groups who did not attend NSO. GPA is higher for students in the 18-21 year old target group who attended NSO than for those who did not attend NSO. GPA is higher for full-time students attending NSO than for full-time students not attending NSO. Again, these data are promising but more data and further analyses are required. During summer 2009, 2,152 incoming students attended NSO sessions at five campuses. Evaluation of these NSO sessions will follow.

The sample size for Fall 2008 pilot data and Spring 2009 data for MTH 3/SDV 100 learning communities is too small for definitive conclusions to be drawn. As the number of learning community sections increase, analysis of their impact on success and persistence will be made available. Student and faculty feedback about learning communities has been positive. This qualitative data will be made available, as well.