

Enhancing Academic Success of Underrepresented Students

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Abstract

The Presidential Mentors Academy (PMA) was established at the University of North Alabama to fulfill needs of diverse students. The academy was established in 1997 to recruit, mentor and retain diverse students into higher education at the University of North Alabama. The PMA program has fostered interactions among students from diverse cultures and has enhanced an educational environment where students feel comfortable and accepted.

PMA Academy Objectives include:

- Provides living/learning experiences for students with a head start.
- College awareness and integration will increase retention of minority students.
- Enhances self-worth, confidence and esteem.
- Enhances progression, retention, and completion of undergraduate degree.

Strategic Goals, areas of identified needs and building on existing interest and opportunities are successful outcome initiatives.

Introduction

A successful Presidential Mentors Academy (PMA) program strategy includes details relating to implementation at a small four year regional, state-assisted institution of higher education in southeast United States. The PMA Program is designed to attract, retain and graduate underrepresented students declaring various majors. The internal scholarship program was initiated in 1997 and currently is on going with the support of university administration. It is based on specific strategies to help incoming freshmen students acclimate to college. The PMA program combines academic success with financial assistance and on-campus work opportunities for qualified underrepresented freshmen students.

The initial program admitted five (5) students; however, currently is admitting twenty (20) students yearly in the annual Cohort. Due to the success of the program, large numbers of students are applying from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. Each year the program has approximately fifty-five (55) applicants applying to the program. Students are provided with academic, tutoring, planning, goal setting, financial support and educational skills essential for success.

The Problem

Research documents (National Center for Educational Statistics Volume 59) that predominately white degree granting institutional are experiencing a decline in progression and retention of racial/ethnic students. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics minority undergraduate enrollment increased from 36% in 1980 to 88.5% in 2012. However, minority students completing educational requirements (graduation rates) continue to remain a major problem. Test results, high school achievement, and socio-economic barriers may inhibit minority students, such as African Americans and Hispanics, from progressing to college level. Educational attainment of minority students increased 38%; this figure does not include a 52% increase of Pacific Islanders. It is well documented that the bachelor's degree attainment for all racial/ethnic groups have increased over the past 12 years (For example, between 1976 and 2008 graduate enrollment for racial/ethnic groups have increased 25%), however, large disparities still exist, gaps are not narrowing, and in some cases they are widening. Once issues are identified with racial/ethnic groups, universities must aggressively initiate strategies to

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improve recruitment, progression, and retention. The primary focus of the PMA program is to ensure success of minority students and enhancing diversity in higher education. Valuing racial and ethnic diversity, without developing tangible methods to achieve the goal of success in higher education, is indeed a problem. The PMA program seeks to create an environment that includes peer mentoring, caring, sensitivity and respect.

In spite of efforts to increase recruitment and retention of diverse faculty and staff, progress initiatives are expanding to recruit and retain students of similar underrepresented groups. The authors have approximately 40 years of combined teaching and advising experiences with diverse students in various institutions. It is believed that success of any program is based upon institutional commitment availability of financial and academic resources. However, many students, in spite of personal and academic problems, are determined to be successful and achieve educational goals. Students who may be 'first college generations' with limited annual income and/or in the single parent role, are determined to graduate despite these obstacles. The demographic composition of the United States has and continues to evolve from a Euro-based population to a composite that reflects the spectrum of the world's races. The university desires that the composite of its student body mirror the composition of people in its service region, at the least, and ideally, the composition of the marketplace in which the graduates will compete.

The Problem

The purpose of this paper is to share one of the best kept secrets in academia; including how to design and replicate a successful Presidential Mentor Academy (PMA) program. Administrators and faculty from various departments at the University of North Alabama

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decided to establish the PMA program. After numerous needs assessments, intense meetings and student assessments; the program was implemented. This group of caring, diverse individuals developed and embraced a planned vision that minority racial and ethnic students can be successful in higher education, if given appropriate and sufficient support and encouragement.

The PMA program purpose includes:

- Increase the number of underrepresented minority students in various majors.
- Establish partnership with students, professors and Career Services.
- Provide opportunities for participants to engage in campus activities/services.
- Track academic progress and personal development: monthly meetings, progress reports and individual private counseling sessions.
- Maximize effective use of campus resources.
- Promote positive images for educator's role.
- Create and implement incentives to retain/recruit qualified minorities
- Increase support and collaboration at all levels throughout the college experience.
- Improve retention/graduation rate.

Health care workers - global review

In 1997, the chair of the Multicultural Advisory Committee collaborated with the President of the University to develop a scholarship program for high school graduates who were from underrepresented racial and/or ethnic groups; primarily African, Native and Hispanic American students from the state of Alabama. The University President was very committed to greater diversity in students and graduates population. With a change in the top administration, there continues to be a strong emphasis on diversity of students/graduates as well as University faculty/staff. The University Strategic Plan, 2007-2012 includes a university-wide goal to promote and celebrate diversity. One successful strategy the University has implemented to accomplish this goal, as related to students, is the PMA program.

The University embraces multiculturalism through its PMA program that reflects diversity and inclusion of underrepresented students. Students who do not receive academic or leadership scholarships and are eligible for regular admission are offered a PMA program scholarship, if the criteria are met. The University has opened doors to attract, select, and retain students who have shown traits of determination, perseverance, and achievement of self.

Admission and Progression

The PMA program is targeted at high school graduating seniors with a desire to attend college and have completed admission requirements. Specific goals of the program are to provide academic support, social assimilation skills, financial assistance, and critical learning experiences. Provisions are aimed at enhancing the probability of academic success of students admitted into the program. Recruitment of students for the program is initiated at the beginning of their high school senior year. A PMA program Fact Sheet is distributed to students during recruitment process by an Admission Counselor. Interested students are encouraged to submit an application and forward required transcript. See Figure 1 for the Davis PMA Success

Model, which outlines steps students must complete in the PMA program.

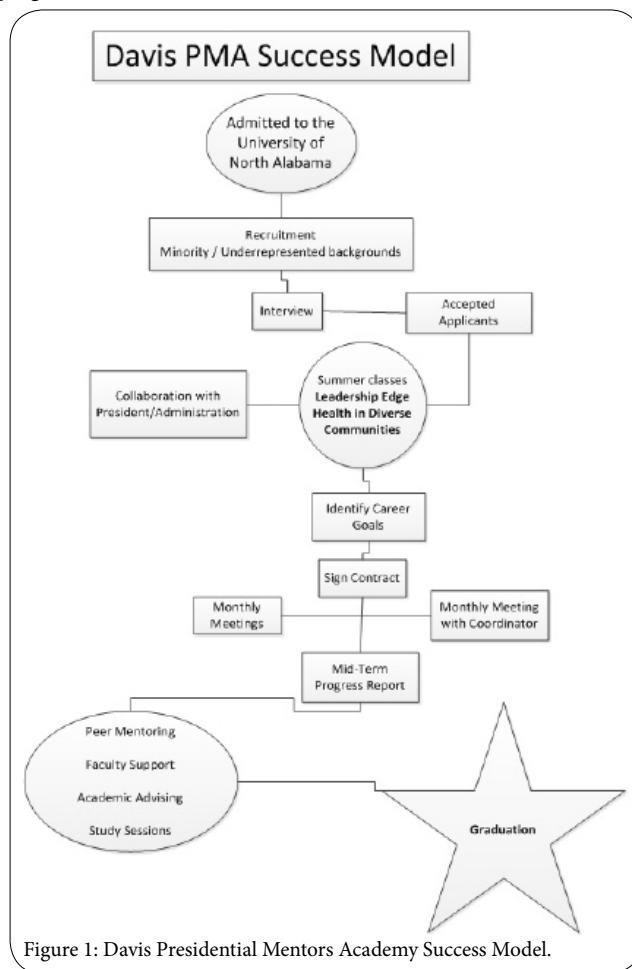


Figure 1: Davis Presidential Mentors Academy Success Model.

Selection Criteria:

1. A resident of the state of Alabama or reside in UNA service area such as to be considered 'in-state' for tuition purposes.
2. Unconditionally admitted to the University.
3. Possess both leadership potential and the potential to succeed in a higher education environment as demonstrated by a résumé of high school activities and written recommendations from the high school principal, counselor, and teachers.
4. Submission of a statement of personal mission, including short and long term personal and career goals.
5. Possess a GPA of 2.5 or higher in high school core courses.
6. Obtain an ACT score of 17 or above.
7. Participate in an interview (conducted by the PMA Advisory Committee).
8. Sign a binding scholarship agreement to meet specific requirements while in the program. The agreement is between the student and the University. It is based on academic, performance and service to the program.

To maintain eligibility for continued participation in the PMA program a student must meet certain program and academic requirements to assure success. The minimum requirements, listed below, represent standards of success and personal commitment

on the part of program participants. Requirements must be met for students to progress.

Members of the PMA program will:

1. Attend the summer school term just prior to entering as a new freshman for the succeeding fall term. During this initial summer term members will complete an orientation four (4) credit course, which includes diversity and leadership components.
2. Agree to reside in University housing the July Summer term.
3. Participate in an on-campus work study program of not more than 20 hours per week, if available. Work study assignments are an expectation of each member and are made at the discretion of and based on the needs of the University. Work study job placement will be facilitated by the University and will follow normal work study placement procedures. Total work study compensation is contingent upon actual hours worked and payment will be made through normal work-study procedures.
4. Enroll as a cohort in an orientation and training course for the initial freshman Fall term; however other course selection will depend on the academic program and academic major of each member upon consultation with the program and major advisors. As much as possible, Program members will be registered for classes as a cohort during the freshman year.
5. Attend monthly group meetings.
6. Maintain a G.P.A. of 2.5 or above
7. Participate in monthly meetings with the Coordinator
8. Signed PMA program scholarship agreement. The agreement includes criteria for retention and permission for the Coordinator to access information from course faculty and family members, if required.

Program Components

Three (3) major components: 1) academic enrichment, 2) career services and academic tutoring, and 3) mentoring and orientation. The academic enrichment component includes a four (4) credit summer course (July session) in which students learn about cultural diversity and leadership concepts. Students gain experience while participating in campus leadership activities such as in the University Student Government Association (SGA), SOAR, FloAla, and ascending voices: black student Association. The career services and academic tutoring component includes: study and test taking skills, time management, and career awareness and planning. One-on-one academic counseling and tutoring is also provided for every student. Mentoring and orientation component provide students with an orientation to overview expectations of higher education. The information the competitive nature of the university environment as well as survival skills. Initially, mentoring is provided by the Coordinator of the program but once a student determines the major they wish to pursue, a mentor in this major is assigned.

Strategies included in the program listed as criteria to ensure greater success includes mandatory monthly group meetings, monthly advisement individual meetings with the Coordinator and cultural initiative. Scheduled group monthly meetings involve activities that enhance campus involvement through work study and social organization(s) activities.

Mid-semester Progress reports are required to obtain information identify problem academic progress. This tracking is required and

may involve the Coordinator discussing student progress with course faculty. A significant family member might be contacted if potential/actual problems are identified as barriers by the student. Strategies are ongoing and have had a positive impact on students contributing to the success of the program.

Monthly meetings with the Coordinator are used to identify specific issues and concerns of the student. This provides an opportunity for the Coordinator and the student to identify potential problems and solutions. If necessary, the Coordinator will link the student with an appropriate PMA peer mentor.

A program check sheet is used and maintained to further track the progress of students during their years of study. Components of the check sheet consist of: grade point average (G.P.A.), hours and course enrollment, living arrangements, university work or campus organizations/leadership involvement, and attendance at monthly meetings. The ability to monitor and track the progression has allowed individualized advising.

The tracking process allows PMA program students to mentor with their professors. The mentoring enhances awareness of problems or potential problems, i.e., academics, social/personal. The tracking also reinforces caring and concern for students as well as assuring academic success. See Figure 2 for a breakdown of the PMA program goals that must be achieved by each student to ensure success (graduation).

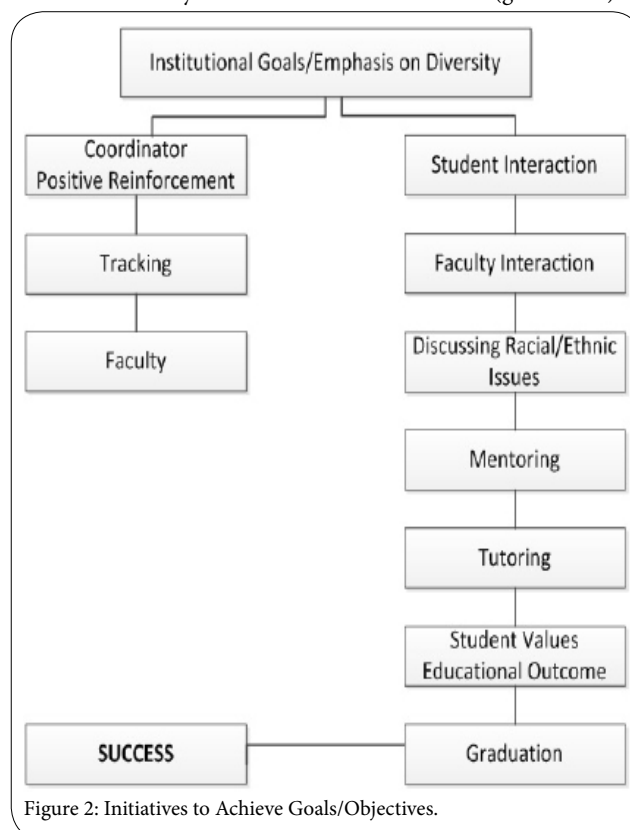


Figure 2: Initiatives to Achieve Goals/Objectives.

Students indicate that their involvement in the PMA program give them a sense of belonging that makes them feel cared for and valued. Students completing the program have maintained communication through letters and telephone contact with the Coordinator. Graduates have shared personal stories that include the impact of the programshaping their lives, families, graduate school completion, fostering self-concept and esteem, promoting accomplishments of

career goals, marriage and children. Some have returned to graduation ceremonies and university receptions.

Some examples of graduate comments include the following:

- “Being a part of PMA changed my life and provided me with the ability to understand and appreciate diversity of cultures and people who are different.”
- “PMA gave me the confidence in myself that I could be successful. Thank you, for believing in me. You are my mentor and friend. You understood my weaknesses and focused on my strengths.”
- I have adopted two (2) children and hope that one day they will attend UNA and be part of this great academy.”
- “I now understand why you encouraged academic excellence. I was able to get my Master’s degree and now I am teaching!”
- “The PMA program helped me to meet other focused leaders of different backgrounds. Most of the people I came in the program with are, without a doubt, lifelong friends. Because of the program, I was allowed an opportunity of financial assistance helping to cut many costs and stress. The program also gave me an opportunity to grow as a leader and to be more culturally aware of people I encountered at school and all over the world.”

Findings:

PMA program enrollment has increased from five (5) students admitted in 1997 to currently twenty (20) students admitted yearly. Currently there are sixty-four (64) students enrolled. Graduation is constant with a combined total of five (5) students graduating spring and Fall semesters. Ninety percent (90%) of students graduate in four (4) years, two percent (2%) graduated in three (3) years, and eight percent (8%) in five (5) years. PMA program students have enrolled in various majors and have successfully completed their required field of study. The graduation rate average for the PMA program was 58.5% in 1999-2007 in comparison to the University of North Alabama graduation rate of 35.4%, showing a difference of 23.1%. See Figure 3 below showing the PMA Graduation Rate compared to the University of North Alabama’s overall graduation rate. Figure 3 does not include the rates of students transferring due to unavailability of their required field of study.

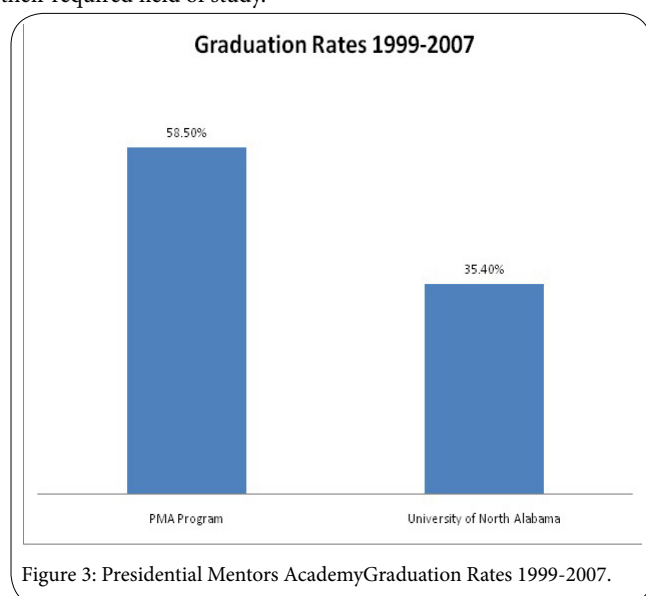


Figure 3: Presidential Mentors Academy Graduation Rates 1999-2007.

The success of the program has demonstrated that living and learning experiences, combined with the academic success ensure successful completion of a university degree. The Coordinator continues to monitor students enrolled in the program to assure that standards and eligibility are maintained. Graduates have continued their education to become doctors, lawyers, teacher, university professors, etc.

Discussion

The monthly required meetings with the Coordinator are personal, individualized and provide opportunities for students to share concerns that impact academic and social success. The Coordinator believes that “students who feel comfortable will ultimately develop a sense of trust, become open and discuss barriers in their lives that have impeded their ability to achieve their vision, mission and goals.” Solutions are explored as students are progressing in their studies. Students expressed a commitment to be successful and to fulfill individualized goals. Some are proving to others that they can graduate and become productive individuals in the workforce. Family support in some cases is unavailable and some find themselves as primary financial providers, peers, and parents. This rigorous responsibility of managing classes, work and family becomes unbearable but the will to succeed is strong. Many have voiced feeling the love of having someone care, which gives hope when life seems hopeless.

Collaborative efforts of the Coordinator such as interacting with administrators, faculty, staff, friends and acquaintances have increased understanding of the importance of all groups working together to maintain and strengthen diversity initiatives for success of the PMA program. Academic programs and services are encouraged and students must participate in campus activities and become actively involved in organizations. This visual participation has erased these previously ‘invisible’ students in campus activities and has given them feeling of belonging and pride. In order to ensure continuation and success of the program a standing committee composed of administrators, faculty, staff and students was appointed by the University President.

Additionally, yearly receptions for incoming PMA program students, family and relatives are planned and funded each summer by the University President. Administrators, Deans, faculty, staff, and friends are invited to attend the reception. College Deans welcome students and share information regarding their College and the importance of staying focused. This ongoing affair has received high appreciation and glowing comments from families and students. Graduates sometime return to share encouraging stories of accomplishments, the benefits of staying focused and the importance of maintaining academic excellence.

Conclusion

The University recognizes that living and learning in a diverse environment is a necessary element in effective education of undergraduates preparing for 21st century jobs. To further its goal of diversity the University supports opportunities for students whose racial groups are underrepresented on the campus. The PMA program provides living/learning experiences for incoming minority freshmen student while maintaining the admission and academic standards of the University. The program combines academic success with financial assistance and on-campus work opportunities for qualifying entering freshmen students. Fourteen (14) years of evidence validates

that caring, bonding, mentoring, peer support/belonging, academic advising, peer engagement, campus involvement, and acceptance of differences within this diverse organization provides a framework for tolerance of all individuals in society. The PMA program through its successful initiatives and administrators support has facilitated the transition of diverse students from high school to college and has increased the diversity of racial/ethnic groups in the work place.

Competing Interests

The author declare that she has no competing interests.

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1. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2010) Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Minorities.
2. UNA Strategic Diversity Plan 2007-2012.