

## A Whole Lot of Shaking Going On

When Jerry Lee Lewis quipped in his song lyrics, “We ain’t faking it—there’s a whole lot of shaking going on,” he could have been talking about the changes that are afoot at Ouachita Technical College. Thanks to the lead set by an Achieving the Dream grant from the Lumina Foundation three years ago, a complex dance of new initiatives, new social networking groups, and new curriculum changes are underway.

Three years ago, the College began a close scrutiny of its basic skills classes—those classes students take to prepare them for college-level work—and of the success and retention of students who take those classes. Based on a year of data analysis, the College identified three areas for focused improvement: new student orientation (with a special focus on the success and retention of African American males), Intermediate Algebra, and Basic Composition—both classes in which some students really struggle. Failure in these classes—called “gateway” courses—prevents some students from going on to get a college degree.

After the identification of the three areas for improvement, and thanks to grant monies, the College researched best practices in the areas and orchestrated some innovative changes in all three areas.

In the area of orientation for new students, the College overhauled the process a student goes through upon entry and made orientation mandatory instead of optional for students. They also added some components such as testing on keyboarding skills and counseling on financial aid to make sure students were knowledgeably prepared for their college experience.

According to Kathy Lazenby, Student Success Coordinator at the College, “With 98% of our students going through orientation, we are better preparing them for their first semester. Students are receiving knowledge of the importance of a syllabus, attendance, degree plans, etc. Along with the Student Success Seminar, OTC saw a 97% completion rate for the Fall 2009 semester compared to the 83% who didn’t take SOS. Increases were found also in student participation in on-campus activities and registration for the next term.”

Another step in improving student success was the creation of a social networking group—called Men on a Mission, or MoM, aimed specifically at guiding African American males in the learning habits and behaviors of successful college students. The group, mentored by Billy Francis, meets regularly to discuss such topics as class attendance, study skills techniques, and dressing for success. They also have as part of their mission service to the community. The students of MoM are getting involved in local high schools as Watchdog Dads, in staffing the community Fall Festival, and in providing other support to help keep their members in college.

According to Dr. Barry Ballard, President of Ouachita Technical College who has formally presented on the strong success of MoM with other educators across the state, “Before Achieving the Dream, African American men had the highest dropout rate of any group at OTC, but since we started Men on a Mission in 2008, the African American men participating are on track to have the highest graduation rate of any demographic group on campus. In the past we failed to serve this group out of benign neglect and now, with MoM, we support them, advise them, counsel them, tutor them, mentor them, listen to them,

check on them and spend time with them and it has made all the difference. Their success and college graduation will change their lives, change their families, change our community and, just maybe, change the culture a little for the better.”

Another step toward change has occurred in Intermediate Algebra—a course in which many students lose their footing. According to OTC math instructor Terri Colananni, “Intermediate algebra is particularly hard for students because it requires them to assimilate a lot of information that they have learned in several courses, but it was long ago, way in the past, sometimes even from junior high. We’re trying to help them recapture that, and we’re trying to find more techniques that appeal to more students’ learning styles.”

So the math faculty have been learning some new moves to enhance student success. They’ve piloted sections of Intermediate Algebra where class time is expanded, and they’ve piloted sections where the instruction is delivered in a variety of ways, such as partly by instructor and partly paired with computer lessons. Now the faculty are re-examining the entire Intermediate Algebra curriculum, taking tests that the students take in Intermediate Algebra to ensure students are learning the building blocks they need for success in College Algebra—the gateway math course that is required for a college degree.

According to Pat Simms, math instructor and Division Chair at Ouachita Technical College, “We’ve been really studying Intermediate Algebra and looking at data on student success. But we don’t have the perfect formula for student success in Intermediate Algebra yet. However, we’re definitely moving forward. We’ve been really engaged in looking at course delivery and curriculum materials and how students learn in math—thanks to the proactive faculty and the Achieving the Dream grant.”

The third step in the initiative has been in Basic Composition, where African American males lag behind Caucasian students in their success rates in that class. The College partnered with Malvern High School and conducted a focus group with African American males and listened closely as the young men discussed their writing habits, their reading preferences, and their perceptions of college in general and of Ouachita Technical College in particular. New moves in Basic Composition have been guided by their input, says Donna Hill, the English initiative leader at Ouachita Technical College. “Since that focus group, we’ve chosen a new textbook that includes up-to-date readings on topics like Facebook and the Internet as well as some of the more traditional essays. We’ve also added an online program the students use that helps them strengthen their writing skills. The technology interests them, and since so many students nowadays are more comfortable on a computer than they are with pen and paper, it’s working well.”

These three primary initiatives, combined with other closely orchestrated moves, have made many changes on campus this spring. There is indeed a whole lot of authentic shaking going on at Ouachita Technical College.