

\$1.6M grant to help Clark College students stay on track

Money will be used to design program to retain first-generation scholars

GRANT FUNDING

- \$371,687 for 2011-2012
- \$374,095 for 2012-2013
- \$380,581 for 2013-2014
- \$305,322 for 2014-2015
- \$250,126 for 2015-2016

By **TOM VOGT**
Columbian staff writer

Clark College has received a \$1.68 million federal grant to help students complete their education.

The five-year grant will allow Clark College to advance its timetable for a program to increase student success, said Shanda Diehl, associate vice president of planning and effectiveness.

The money will fund about five staff members to improve

advising and program assessment, which is how colleges make sure that students have actually learned what they were supposed to learn to earn their degree or certificate.

While a big portion of Clark's students will benefit, Diehl said, the focus will be on what she called "first-time, first-generation" college students.

They don't have family members with college experience who could help them navigate higher education, Diehl said.

Clark will design a program to reach these students "on the front end to help them navigate the system," she said. "That's real-

ly important at Clark, where 67 percent of our students are first-generation college students."

Clark's first-generation/first-time higher-education rookies amount to 3,000 to 4,000 students each year, Diehl said.

Another approach will be forming learning communities.

"Building relationships between students and faculty helps retention," Diehl said. "Relationships help them decide to come back next quarter."

In addition to the grant-funded programs, "we are doing a lot of work in math and writing preparedness: people being college-ready," she said.

Getting into some specifics, the news release explained that grant-funded efforts "will be centered around increasing the completion rate from 20 to 30 percent among the degree-seeking Clark students who use the services funded by this grant. The national completion rate for public two-year colleges is 22 percent."

There are several reasons many students don't complete their work. Half of Clark's students are 25 and older and often have to balance jobs and family obligations with their studies.

Grant:

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Challenges faced by the first-generation college students can be another factor, Diehl said.

And, "an issue for community colleges is that students can come in expecting to complete a degree or a certificate. But if employers really want you, they don't care about a degree or certificate," she said. Those students often quit school to focus on work.

Other students, whose goal is a bachelor's degree, don't always finish up their two-year associate's degree before they transfer to a four-year university.

The grant was awarded by the U.S. Department of Education under its "Strengthening Institutions" initiative. It will come in handy as the state continues to cut higher education funding.

The grant money can't be

used to replace lost state funding, however.

"We're not allowed to supplant, only enhance," Diehl said. "It won't backfill. But it will give us resources that will increase student success."

"Our mission is to provide opportunities for every student to succeed," Clark College President Bob Knight said in the news release.

"With the state now providing only about 40 percent of our funding and more state budget cuts pending, dollars from grants and donors are critically important to our ability to effectively support our students and our region in new ways," Knight said.

Clark College has a fall enrollment of 15,526 students taking at least one class. It is the equivalent of 10,237 full-time students, a 2 percent increase from fall 2010.

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