



Contraception key to boost grad rates at community colleges

Community colleges could improve their graduation rates by helping students avoid unplanned pregnancies. That's the thinking behind a campaign to encourage faculty members to incorporate material about pregnancy planning into academic courses.

The project makes its point with edgy material, which is surprising because it's led by the American Association of Community Colleges, with financial backing and other support from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Major higher education associations are an unlikely source for an illustration featuring cartoon sperm and an egg, or of frank discussions about students' sex lives.

Not so for the association's "Make It Personal: College Completion" campaign. For example, its web portal includes a link to videos on common myths about birth control. In one called "Chronic Problems," a young woman says in a voiceover: "My boyfriend smokes a lot of weed. Like a lot, which basically makes his sperm dead. So we're not all that careful anymore."

The video continues with a medical doctor, Eve Espey, who responds to that claim by saying that heavy marijuana smokers can indeed be fertile. She then jokingly cites population growth during the weed-plentiful sixties to bolster her case.

The program's goal is to help community college students "make smart decisions about sex and relationships." To do so, the material needs to appeal to young adults, said Andrea Kane, senior director of public policy at the National Campaign. "We have to make it engaging to students," she said, "in terms that work for them."

What works for students, however, might also scare off more buttoned-up community college presidents, who, as leaders of public institutions, are often wary of rankling conservative lawmakers. And birth control and student health insurance has been a hot-button issue of late. But so far only one community college leader who had expressed interest in the campaign has gotten a case of nerves and backed out, campaign officials said.

The project is aimed at adults, which makes it less controversial than sex and birth control education can be at the K-12 level. It steers well clear of abortion issues and tries to be nonpolitical. However, the messages reflect a belief that community college students have sex and that many such students can benefit from delaying parenthood.

"We haven't found it to be a terribly hard sell," Kane said.

That's because information about birth control is a cheap and effective way to help students get to graduation, the project's leaders said. And many community colleges lack the student health centers that are the norm among four-year institutions.

Participating colleges will face one problem: "Be prepared to get embarrassed occasionally," said Gail Robinson, director of service learning for the community college association. It's not always easy to talk to students about sex, she said, particularly in the blunt terms recommended by the project.

Launched in 2010, the campaign offers curriculum support so colleges can redesign courses to teach about pregnancy planning. So far five colleges have received grants -- \$20,000 in most cases -- and have worked campaign material into biology, business management, communication, English and other classes. (In this video, faculty members talk about the project.)

Another approach is to incorporate pregnancy information into student support services, including orientation and student success courses. On the more ambitious end, Richland College of the Dallas County Community College District, which is not a grant recipient, has used some of the program's material in success courses that all incoming, first-time students must take. Other colleges have encouraged faculty members and staff to share links to campaign material with students.

This fall the project's organizers hope to release online lessons, tailored for use with first-year experience curriculums. They hope free, well-produced course material can find a home at many campuses.

'Back Off Baby'

It's a novel concept to link unplanned pregnancy and the national college completion push. But the fact that pregnancy can make it difficult for students to keep up with their coursework is hardly news, particularly when they also have jobs, as do many community college students.

The project's directors said they have heard from many community college administrators and professors about students - both female and male - who drop out after the arrival of an unplanned child, and never return. They said those powerful anecdotes, however, are rarely associated with completion rates.

Michael Rice, a father of two and student at Ivy Tech Community College, said in a video produced by the program that the responsibilities of parenthood increase the amount of work it takes to be successful as a student.

"I don't have the luxury of studying when I have my children in front of me," he said, noting that he studies when his kids are asleep or at school.

The campaign brings numbers to back its claims. It cites research finding that 61 percent of women who have children after enrolling in community college fail to earn degrees - a rate that is 65 percent higher than for women who didn't have children.

In a survey conducted for the project, 87 percent of community college students said a pregnancy would make it harder for them to achieve educational goals. But 35 percent also said they were likely to have sex without using birth control in the next three months.

Kane said their research found that 4-7 percent of community college students reported an unplanned pregnancy during a 6-24 month period. Those numbers means good pregnancy planning could actually result in a noticeable bump in graduation rates.

Palo Alto College, located in San Antonio, is one of the project's grantees. Mike Flores, the college's vice president of student affairs, said the communications department has added curricular material from the project into courses. For example, students in a news reporting and writing class wrote press releases for a local advocacy group that works on teen pregnancy, he said.

Flores said the college was currently considering a plan to incorporate pregnancy prevention into a mandatory student success course.

San Antonio has lots of urban poverty. And Flores said the city's leaders are worried about the impact of teen and unplanned pregnancies. "It's a pressing issue in our community."

Texas, like most other states, has seen a strong push for colleges to improve their graduation rates. And one way to try is with pregnancy planning.

"It really is part of that completion agenda," Flores said.