I. Title of Project

Sophomore Success Initiative: Course in Academic and Career Exploration, Personal and Professional Development for the Second Year Student

II. Statement of Purpose

I am requesting a Sabbatical Leave to research and design a course for students in their second year at CCSU to give exploratory sophomores the skills, resources and opportunity to explore personal, academic and career goals and interests.

In recent years a great deal of interest has been paid to identifying the issues contributing to the “sophomore slump.” Most researchers agree that selection of a major is a critical decision facing students in the second year. The selection of an appropriate major sets the stage for more engaged learning, positive interactions with faculty and provides momentum toward graduation.

 In fall 2011, there were 569 “undecided” Arts and Sciences students at CCSU of whom 168 or 18.5% were sophomores (OIRA). It has been consistently reported that between 20% and 50% of all entering students are undecided about academic major and career and 45% change their major during both their first and second years (McCalla-Wriggins, 2000; Theophilides et al., 1984). Additionally there are large numbers of students who have declared a major with little or no research or thought about their interests, abilities and possible career paths. By their own admission, these students’ major selections are transient, whimsical, chosen to quiet the questions from friends and family. It is not an overstatement to suggest that exploratory students are the majority rather than the minority (Lewallen, 1993). We as a university are negligent not to provide some assistance to students struggling with this important decision. We bear some institutional responsibility to teach students to be active and not passive participants in this process. We need to ask students important questions and give them the tools and opportunities to find answers. The processes of academic and career exploration have always been an important part of the undergraduate experience and are even more critical today with our challenging and changing job market and economy.

The selection of an appropriate major is only one component of a larger problem among exploratory students: motivation. Many of these students admit that they have no idea why they are here at CCSU. They usually cite parental or cultural expectations. This lack of direction, purpose and focus contributes to some students’ boredom, lack of momentum and failure to stay and graduate. Over the last four years, on average, 11% of sophomores did not return for their junior year.

My ultimate objective is to design a course to teach students how to explore potential majors and career paths which will increase their potential for success at CCSU and their persistence to graduation. By creating and testing a pilot course to structure and support the exploration process, it is my goal to give uncommitted, transitioning sophomores the information, skills and tools to begin the process of academic and personal decision making and goal realization.

III. Describe Existing Knowledge

The first thirteen years of my academic career were spent in Cooperative Education, Life-Career Planning and Career Services at Northeastern University, Pace University and CCSU. In each of these positions, I had the opportunity to work with students who had a sense of purpose, drive, motivation. The students with these traits and abilities set personal and academic goals, were successful and graduated in a timely fashion.

When I returned to CCSU in 2001 after some time away, I encountered a different student. Many students were not graduating in a timely fashion, and some were simply leaving without a degree. Conducting advising sessions with students at all levels of academic success; I discovered that many were just taking courses with no direction or focus. Their majors were selected with flimsy or no research. They were not aware that choosing a major is a process which requires self-assessment and research. Even more alarming was the realization that they had no idea how to begin the search. In the course of advising sessions with undecided students I will usually ask, “Would you like me to pick a major for you?” Their answer is almost always, “yes!” In many cases, not much has been expected or required of them. Many of these students have unrealistic expectations and incorrect information. Their assumptions must be challenged and they must be given the responsibility to conduct self-assessment, investigate their academic options and research career paths.

In the past seven years as Assistant Dean of Arts and Sciences, I have conducted hundreds of advising sessions with these uncommitted students. I have spent a great deal of time explaining to individual students the importance of researching academic disciplines, interviewing faculty, students and employers before making important academic and career choices. Every student at one of these advising sessions shared that they wished they had known this information earlier in their academic career. Given the large numbers of sophomores who are either listed as undecided or in transition from one major to another, this one-on-one dissemination of information is not practical. Although my research and examples are anecdotal, the themes are consistent and collected over many years of advising students. Based on my experience, a course that introduces some practical tools and concepts to students who are unfocused or unmotivated will be a great benefit to the student and the university.

I have experience in developing and teaching similar courses. I taught undergraduates in The Life/Career Planning Program at Northeastern University and I adapted that curriculum into our Career Development Seminar, a mandatory component of the Cooperative Education program. Both courses were substantial, practical, effective and rated highly by students.

IV. Description of Proposed activities

Based upon my previous experience in Higher Education, I am well versed in career development theory and practice. My position as Assistant Dean and other responsibilities have left little time to keep up-to-date with new developments in the field. I have recently become immersed in popular research relating to student success such as Daniel Pink’s “ Drive,” Carol Dweck’s “ Mindset,” and Angela Duckworth’s work on character traits and Grit. I intend to continue my study on these important theories of non-cognitive factors which contribute to success in school and life and incorporate them into the course curriculum.

A sabbatical would afford me the privilege of delving into the current research on these current topics and designing a plan to incorporate them into the proposed curriculum. I plan to contact and visit peer institutions and consult with colleagues on best practices, similar courses and successful sophomore initiatives. I plan to attend several conferences to connect with my colleagues and prominent researchers in the field of student success. I intend to conduct interviews with administrators of successful sophomore initiatives at the University of South Carolina and Beloit University. Research at these schools and others would allow me to incorporate successful practices from schools with proven results.

I have collected many notes from advising sessions with students over the years. I plan to review and summarize these notes and interview more students, individually and in groups, to try to discover what they are lacking in information and support. I will conduct focus groups with sophomores to collect data: institutional, qualitative and quantitative. I will identify a target population for the proposed pilot based on the findings.

I will design a pilot course for implementation in fall 2014. The optimal number of students for the pilot would be 25-30. The one-credit, eight-week seminar will comprise 8 hours of class time supplemented by one-on-one or small group advising support with university assistants and peer advisors in our school-based center. I will teach the course and train the university assistants and peer advisors in the Arts and Sciences Advising Place (ASAP) to offer advising support. It is expected that the high level of contact and intrusive advising will be instrumental in the success and persistence of the students.

 A great deal of time and research will be required to design the course, training for advising support staff and accompanying materials such as a workbook. It is my plan to create a workbook binder with class materials, references, readings, assignments as well as recommendations for subsequent years leading up to graduation.

In my role as liaison for the School of Arts and Sciences with Travelers, I have had preliminary discussions on creating a professional development component for our students in conjunction with human resources staff and CCSU alumni working at Travelers. During the sabbatical semester, I will meet with local employers such as Travelers and ESPN to formalize arrangements for recent alumni to share their workplace experience with exploratory students in the pilot course.

As part of the curriculum, I also plan to host a series of faculty presentations designed to introduce students to different academic disciplines and career possibilities. Last semester, The Arts and Sciences Advising Place (ASAP) sponsored a presentation by journalism professor, Darren Sweeney who described the academic and career goals and plans that led him to his dual career as meteorologist and teacher. Favorable evaluations from the dozens of students in attendance suggest that future presentations from faculty would be helpful.

In addition to researching and designing course content, readings, texts, assignments etc., I will create specific goals, measurable outcomes, evaluation instruments and plans for follow-up with the pilot course participants. To determine the feasibility of replicating the successful pilot course, I will spend part of the sabbatical researching exisiting resources, personnel and administrative models for offering the course to students across the university.

V .Value to university and professional development

I have been thinking about a project like this for years-- an initiative to combine academic advising and career development in a structured course format. The positive student response to my previous seminars and my enthusiasm for the subject matter have drawn me back to develop a new course that is practical, immediately useful and addresses a serious problem. Every year I collect more stories of students who would have found success with such an intervention. In terms of professional development this project would allow me to research, read, connect with colleagues and take the time to create a formal curriculum and support designed specifically for our underserved population of uncommitted, exploratory sophomores.

The great value to the university will be to offer these students a structured and supportive framework to decide on goals and direction for their undergraduate studies and acquire skills for successful life-career planning. This curriculum will add to our current advising services on campus. The pilot course will allow me to create a model to serve a group of students by delivering crucial information in an eight-week course and providing mentors and support in our school-based center.

VI. Expected outcomes.

Based upon favorable evaluations of my previous courses at Northeastern and CCSU, I expect the proposed course and accompanying support in the advising center would be welcomed by student participants and contribute directly to a more successful student experience at CCSU. Further, it is expected that students who participate in the course will gain the necessary skills, knowledge and direction to be more engaged in their learning and more invested in completing their degree. It is expected that the course could be replicated in collaboration with other advising offices and offered to students across the university.

Abstract

Recent research has focused on sophomores as students in transition needing support from the university to succeed. The Sophomore Success Initiative is a proposal to deliver critical information and support to our sophomores in transition.

 One of the most important decisions facing second-year students is the selection of an appropriate major. The course described in this proposal would give sophomores the opportunity to explore and select an appropriate major and career path compatible with their interests, abilities and values. Participation in this pilot will increase the potential for sophomores in transition to have a successful college experience and develop momentum toward graduation.

It is expected that the successful pilot could be expanded across the university and should produce students who are more engaged learners, more connected with faculty and more likely to stay and graduate in a timely manner.