

IMPROVING COMMUNITY COLLEGE COMPLETION RATES:  
THE CASE OF ISOTHERMAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

A disquisition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of  
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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March 2016

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank our committee members and director for their assistance and encouragement. In particular, we acknowledge Dr. Kofi Lomotey for his guidance throughout this new and uncharted process.

We also extend sincere thanks to the following people, without whom this disquisition would not have been possible: Joel Ekstrom, Mark Carpenter, Kelly Metcalf who readily offered assistance in writing queries to collect the necessary data from our student management system, Susan Straw for helping with layout and formatting, and Dr. Nancy Womack for assistance in copy editing. Special thanks to the entire Isothermal Student Services Staff, Dr. Kim Gold, and Dr. Johnny Smith who offered daily support and encouraging words throughout the entire process, and our Cohort 1 classmates and professors who made going to class and meeting online a joy and some of the highlights of the last three years. Lastly, we offer our warmest regards and thanks to our families and friends who believed in us and supported us throughout this process.

## DEDICATION

There are so many people to whom I'd like to dedicate this disquisition. Firstly, to my mom, Dr. Nancy Womack, who showed me as a young child that you can go back to school and earn your doctorate while working and raising a family. She is my inspiration always to reach higher and never settle. Secondly, to my daughter, Miah, who doesn't quite yet understand what all of this education stuff is all about, but who I hope will follow in her grandmother's and mother's footsteps in her own time and also see that it is possible to dream big and reach higher. Thirdly, to my husband, Jeremiah, who has supported me over the last three years by caring for Miah when I had class or needed to work on projects. Lastly, I want to dedicate this disquisition to the students past, present, and future who I hope it will help the most. We exist as educators to support students and help students achieve all that they dream they can be. It is one of my proudest accomplishments to serve others and I hope this disquisition will do much to help all students start strong and finish stronger!

-Alice

This disquisition is dedicated first to my husband, Shane. You have endured ten years of classes, papers, presentations, and exams. You have often played dual roles of dad and mom to our children and through it all you have been a constant source of support and encouragement. To my children Kelby, McKenna, and Teagan, I hope that my persistence shows you that any goal can be achieved as long as you are committed. This was not in my original plan, so be open to opportunities that come your way and make the best of the talents you have been given. Surround yourselves with people who love and support you, and friends who applaud your successes. To my parents, extended family and church, thank you for your many prayers and encouraging words. To my friends (especially Christina and Regina), thank you for listening all the times I babbled incessantly about projects and papers. You have listened, laughed, and cried with me over these past few years and I treasure each of you more than I could ever say.

-Vanessa

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## ABSTRACT

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Western Carolina University (March 2016)

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State and national programs such as Completion by Design, Achieving the Dream, and SuccessNC are leading to an increased emphasis on student completion driven in part by President Obama's 2020 goal to increase degree attainment from 40 to 60% (Kanter, Ochoa, Nassif, & Chong; 2011). As a result, community colleges must adopt policies that continue to foster student success and promote retention while ensuring that quality education and services are provided. Anticipating legislation, the North Carolina Community College System is moving toward a performance-based funding model to address these issues. The open-door mission will be challenged as greater emphasis is placed on completion rates rather than mere enrollment numbers. To address these challenges, the Isothermal Community College Development Team engaged in intensive research to identify barriers to student completion and best practices to help students overcome common hurdles. Through the research process, the development team recommended a strengthened entry and progression process for students. The "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." initiative educates, engages and empowers first-time college students to achieve successful college completion through comprehensive educational planning. This is achieved through mandatory orientation, proactive advising, and mandatory registration into a student success course within the first two semesters.

PART I: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW



## Introduction

State and National programs such as Completion by Design, Achieving the Dream, and SuccessNC are leading to an increased emphasis on student completion driven in part by President Obama's 2020 goal to increase degree attainment from 40 to 60% (Kanter, Ochoa, Nassif, & Chong; 2011). As a result, community colleges must adopt policies that continue to foster student success and promote retention while ensuring that both quality education and services are provided. Anticipating legislation, the North Carolina Community College System is moving toward a performance-based funding model to address these issues. The open-door mission will be challenged as greater emphasis is placed on completion rather than mere enrollment numbers. To address these challenges, the Isothermal Community College (ICC) Development Team engaged in intensive research to identify barriers to student completion and best practices to help students overcome common hurdles. Through the research process, the development team recommended a strengthened entry and progression process for students including mandatory orientation, proactive advising, and mandatory enrollment in a student success course within the first two semesters.

### **Completion: The National Picture**

Community colleges educate 36% of the undergraduate students in the United States (Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskin, Yuan, & Harrell; 2013). While enrollment has increased nationwide over the past 15 years, completion rates have decreased. In 1999, 23% of community college students earned a credential within three years. In 2005, only 21% earned a credential within three years (Nodine, Venezia, and Bracco, 2011). More recently, a National Student Clearinghouse report indicated that within six years of enrolling in community college only 26.5% of students completed a degree, diploma, or certificate from the initial institution (Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskin, Yuan, and Harrell, 2013). Altogether only 39.9% of students who began at a community college completed any credential from either another two-year institution or four-year institution after six years from initial enrollment (Shapiro et al, 2013). In 2009, President Barack Obama issued a national challenge to increase student completion rates to 60% by 2020 (Kanter,

et al., 2011). Achieving the Dream and Completion by Design programs have emerged as the leading models to help community colleges design and implement improvement efforts to increase student success and completion.

In 2016, the University Business Journal conducted a survey of 100 presidents, chancellors and provosts regarding leadership priorities and initiatives. An overwhelming 84 percent of the respondents identified student success as being a top four priority. Nearly 50 percent of campuses planned to pilot or launch student success initiatives and a third planned to make significant changes or expand current success initiatives. Retention, academic success outcomes, and improved graduation rates were among the top three areas where student success efforts were targeted (Zalaznick, 2016).

Many studies have been conducted to identify barriers to student success at community colleges. According to Rath, Rock, and Laferriere (2013), the primary categories of barriers are (1) inadequate academic preparation, (2) remedial education, (3) student financial aid, (4) lack of non-academic skills, and (5) competing obligations.

#### **A. Inadequate Academic Preparation**

According to Venezia and Kirst (2005), 70% of high school graduates attend some form of postsecondary institution within two years of graduating from high school. Unfortunately, their study found that only about a quarter of students are in a college preparatory curriculum while in high school, leading to significant gaps in academic preparation for college courses. Parker (2012) also notes that secondary school leaders and college leaders rarely meet to discuss ways to align curricula. Additionally, many community college students are adults coming to school for the first time in many years due to economic factors. Delaying enrollment has been shown to correlate negatively with student persistence as gaps in enrollment further magnify inadequate academic preparation (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; McKinney & Novak, 2012).

#### **B. Remedial Education**

Fifty-six percent of the respondents in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCCSE) stated that their placement test results indicated they needed remedial education in at least one area (CCCSE, 2012). CCCSE further found through their research that

the longer it takes a student to progress through remedial education, the more likely it is that he or she will drop out. Other researchers have found that students in remedial education are less likely to complete or transfer once they complete their fifth year. Twenty-nine percent were found to complete or transfer if they were not referred to any developmental courses. Twenty-three percent would complete or transfer if they were only referred to one developmental subject, 19% if they were referred to two subjects, and only 15% would complete or transfer if they were referred to three developmental subjects (Clery, 2012). (See Table 1). To further compound the issue of remedial education, placement exams do not accurately pinpoint a student's areas of needed improvements (within a given discipline). This leads to students being placed in inappropriate courses and lengthens their time in remedial education (Parker, 2012).

Table 1

## Developmental Course Referrals and Five-Year Student Completion

Referrals to Developmental Courses	Five-Year Completion or Transfer Rate
0	29%
1	23%
2	19%
3 or more	15%

(Clery, 2012)

**C. Student Financial Aid**

On a national level, about 42% of grant-eligible students did not file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (McKinney & Novak, 2012). McKinney & Novak also found that students who applied for financial aid were 79% more likely to persist compared to students who did not file a FAFSA. Because many community college students are also first generation college students and tend to have lower incomes, they often are unaware of what aid is available to them to help them pay for school (McKinney & Novak, 2012; Rath et al., 2013). Additionally, that lack of knowledge often leads to students not understanding the federal regulations that could

negatively impact their financial aid in the future. Recently, new federal regulations have reduced the amount of time a student may receive Pell Grant money from 18 semesters to 12 semesters (Rath et al., 2013). This reduction in available aid compounded by students struggling to complete developmental education sequences creates further difficulty for students in completing a program of study.

#### **D. Lack of Non-academic Skills**

Community colleges typically have high numbers of first generation college students, low-income students, and academically disadvantaged students. All of these factors lead to many community college students lacking non-academic skills or knowledge about how the institution works, what is expected of them, and how to begin to navigate the process (Rath et al., 2013; Karp, 2011; Cho & Karp, 2013; McKinney & Novak, 2012; Venezia & Kirst, 2005; CCCSE, 2012). Often, students who attend community college decide late that they will enroll and have little information about how to navigate the experience. They are often unprepared for the expectations, how to go about studying for classes and how to manage their time (Gandara, Alvarado, Driscoll, & Orfield, 2012). Orientation programs and student success courses can help students begin to navigate the college experience and build college knowledge. Yet, CCCSE found that while 97% of colleges offer some form of orientation, only about 60% of students participate (2013). Rath et al. (2013) found that only 38% of colleges had instituted mandatory orientation. Another critical component to building non-academic skills lies in the area of advising and academic planning. Many community college students do not know how to sequence their classes to move through a program and need support of advisors to build those skills and stay on course. Researchers have found that students do not take adequate advantage of these resources. CCCSE (2013) found that faculty members referred students to advising and planning services 85% of the time; yet students were only using advising and planning services 54% of the time. Associate of Arts and Sciences students need even more support to clarify career and academic goals as they must plan for successful transfer to complete their desired programs (Tinto, 2012).

### **E. Competing Obligations**

Community college students are not just students as is often the case in a traditional university setting. Community college students have many other obligations. Fifty-nine percent of them are attending college part time, 19% of full time students and 42% of part time students are working 30 or more hours a week while going to school, 29% of full time and 37% of part time students are caring for dependents, and 13% of full time and 40% of part time students are taking classes only on the weekends or evenings (CCCSE, 2012). Part time enrollment has also been found to correlate negatively with student persistence (McKinney & Novak, 2012). Rath et al. (2013) found that six out of 10 students who left college were paying for college themselves and were forced to leave due to family financial obligations. Another challenge many students face is inadequate emotional support from their families. This can create barriers for the students in staying engaged with the college through to completion. To combat these issues, students must be made aware of available supports to help them financially and emotionally as they struggle to accomplish their goals. Early, continuous, and consistent contact and solid personal relationships with faculty and staff are instrumental in student persistence (Drake, 2011).

Each of the aforementioned barriers contributes to low completion rates. Not only is completion in the national spotlight, but it is also becoming part of state community college funding formulas. This change in funding is critical for small, rural institutions that have minimal local revenue and rely primarily on state funding. It will also force local institutions to identify barriers and provide increased student support so that they can remain competitive.

### **The North Carolina Community College Completion Dilemma**

North Carolina community colleges are experiencing the strain of inadequate student completion rates much like schools across the nation. In 2010, the curriculum completion rate as calculated by the North Carolina Community College System's (NCCCS) Performance Measures for Student Success was 39% across the 58 community colleges in the system (NCCCS, 2014). NCCCS defines completion as the number of students who (1) achieve credentials, (2) transfer to a four-year institution, or (3) remain continuously enrolled six years after beginning a program at a

North Carolina community college. First year progression is a benchmark indicator that NCCCS uses to project student completion. NCCCS defines successful first year progression as the percentage of first-year students who complete 12 credit hours within their first academic year: fall, spring, summer (NCCCS, 2014). The system average for student progression in 2010 was only 68% (NCCCS, 2014).

In fall 2010, the North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges, working in association with leaders from the North Carolina Association of Community College Presidents and the North Carolina Association of Community College Trustees, endorsed a significant planning initiative, SuccessNC, to foster guiding goals that would positively impact student success ([www.successnc.org](http://www.successnc.org)). The goals of SuccessNC are to (1) facilitate the sharing of best practices, (2) initiate statewide policies to foster student success while removing those that inhibit student success, and (3) develop new performance-based student success measures between 2010 and 2013.

According to the NCCCS, SuccessNC's guiding goals were established to focus on bringing more college-ready students into high-quality educational and workforce training programs that will allow them to be well prepared for the post-recession economy as employees or entrepreneurs. These goals were developed as part of the System Office's strategic planning initiative with input from state board members, community college presidents, trustees, faculty, staff and system office leadership. They are:

- **Improve Student Success:** Increase the number of students leaving with a job-ready credential that can lead to becoming a successful employee or employer in a global economy and provide for better skills, better jobs, better pay, and continued educational attainment.
- **Increase Student Access:** Develop policies and practices that provide increased opportunities for students to enter into and proceed successfully through postsecondary education and training programs.
- **Ensure Program Excellence:** Examine and continually improve rigor, relevance and quality in all academic and training opportunities to ensure that successful completion

equates to a competitive position in the workforce or in the attainment of higher educational goals ([www.successnc.org](http://www.successnc.org)).

As part of the statewide Performance Measures for Student Success, NCCCS established a target to increase student completion rates from a state-wide average of 40% for the fall 2004 cohort to 59% for the fall 2014 cohort ([www.successnc.org](http://www.successnc.org)). Doing so will bring North Carolina closer to meeting President Obama's 2020 completion challenge. To help move North Carolina colleges forward, NCCCS has established intermediate target goals for curriculum completion and first-year progression. The System goal for curriculum completion has been set at 45.6% and the first-year progression goal has been set at 74.6%. These goals were set at one standard deviation above the System mean and will be reassessed for the 2016 report to establish new goals (NCCCS, 2014).

### **Isothermal Community College: Historical Perspectives of Student Success**

Isothermal Community College (ICC) was founded in 1964 and is a member of the North Carolina Community College system. It is a comprehensive, two-year, public institution that serves the individuals of Rutherford and Polk counties. ICC's mission is to "improve life through learning" (*About isothermal*, n.d). Commitment to the mission contributed to Isothermal being ranked 17th on the list of America's Best Community Colleges in terms of student engagement and satisfaction by *Washington Monthly* in 2013 (Carey, 2013).

ICC offers more than 60 certificate, diploma, and degree curricula serving approximately 2,000 students. The average age of ICC students is 24. Seventy-four percent are white and 84% of all students receive financial assistance (unpublished raw data, 2015). The College offers students opportunities to earn credentials, acquire new skills for employment and transfer to four-year institutions, while serving as a gateway to other two-year community college programs. In addition, the College provides training for area businesses and industries, remedial and developmental courses, and community service activities.

Completion rates as defined by NCCCS through annual Performance Measures of Student Success Reports at ICC for 2014 were 38.6%, which is below the System average of

43% and the goal of 45.6% (NCCCS, 2014). ICC's completion rate has averaged 38.1% over the past five years ranging from 35% to 41%. ICC's first-year progression rate for 2014 was 67.8%, which is slightly below the System average of 68.3% and well below the System goal of 74.6%. Over the past five years, the first-year progression rate at ICC has ranged from 71% to 65% with an average of 68.4% (See Figures 1 & 2). Internally, ICC monitors student retention as another indicator of student progression toward completion. Since 2010, the fall-to-spring retention rate has decreased from 78% to 67% and the fall-to-fall retention rate has decreased from 47% to 43%, which parallels the patterns demonstrated in the NCCCS Performance Measures report (Unpublished raw data, 2013 & 2014) (See Figure 3).

Figure 1-2010-2014 Completion Rates

Figure 2- 2010-2014 Progression Rates

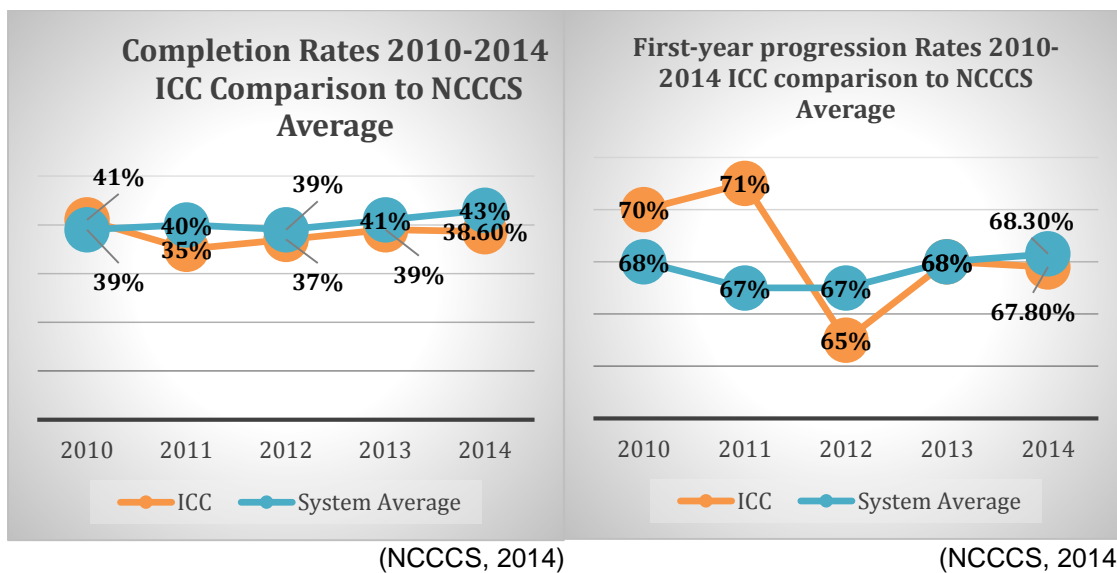
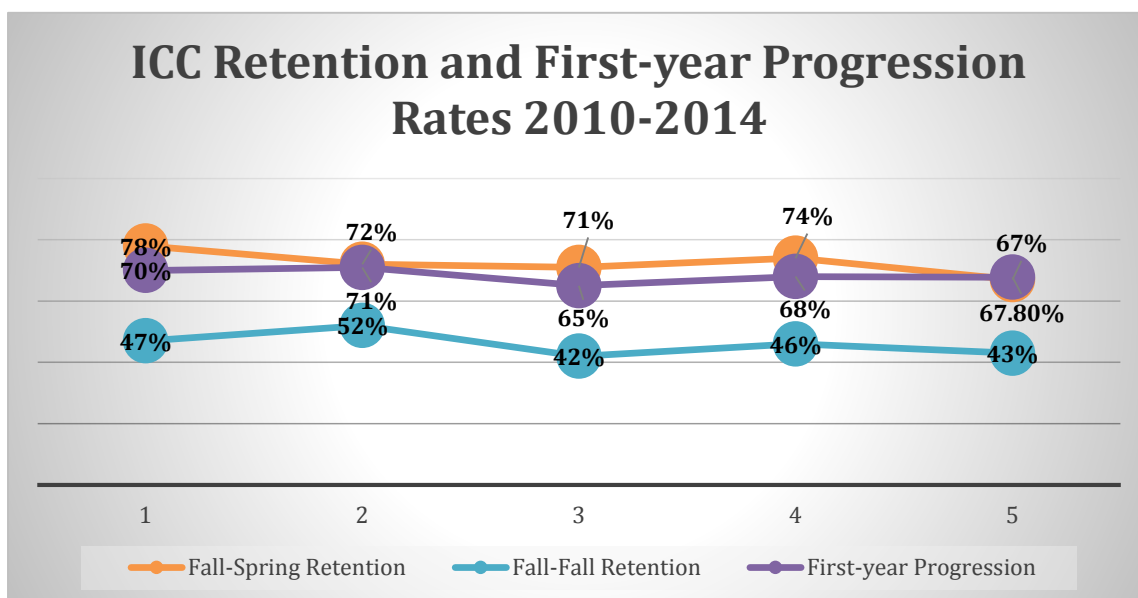




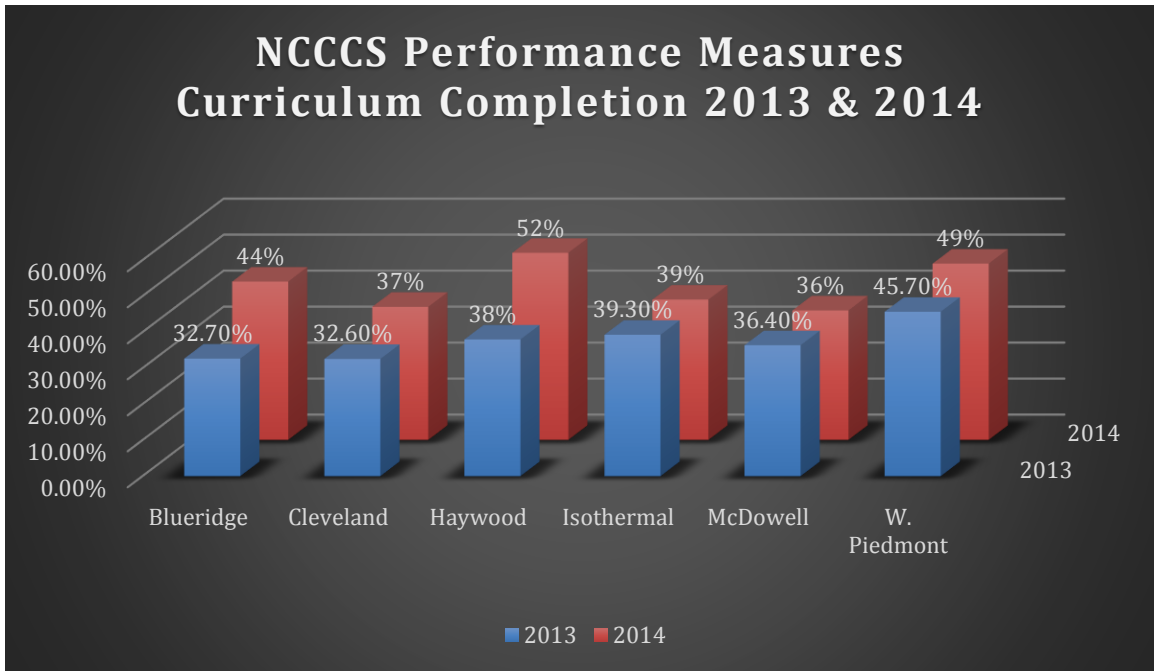
Figure 3-2010-2014 ICC Retention and First Year Progression Rates Comparison



(NCCCS, 2014 & ICC Records Office, 2013 & 2014)

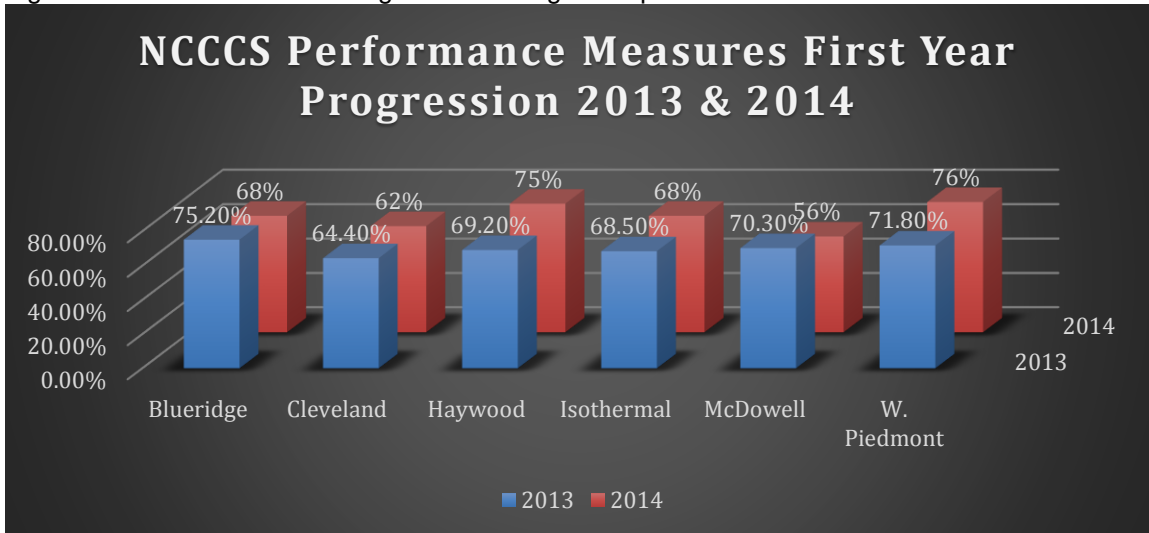
Even more disconcerting is that Isothermal lags behind or is on par with several neighboring colleges in the completion and first-year progression measures for student success. Several schools have made substantial progress toward improving their performance measures between the 2013 and 2014 report while ICC has remained at or near identical performance levels (See Figures 4 & 5). While ICC has a high national ranking for engagement and satisfaction, there is less success in areas of retention and progression compared with neighboring schools. As other community colleges become more and more competitive in recruiting students from surrounding areas and students become more savvy consumers in comparing their options for postsecondary education, it is critical for ICC to make progress toward improving student success to attract and retain students.

Figure 4-NCCCS Curriculum Completion College Comparison



(ICC, 2013&2014; NCCCS, 2013&2014)

Figure 5-NCCCS First Year Progression College Comparison



(ICC, 2013&2014; NCCCS, 2013&2014)

**The Isothermal Improvement Initiative: “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.”**

Through a 2013 professional development activity conducted by the Office of Assessment, Planning, and Research designed to gain insights from faculty and staff regarding students' greatest learning needs, three key themes were identified:

1. To remove barriers to success, our students need engagement and motivation to think critically and learn.
2. To be job or transfer ready, our students need educational planning focused on completion.
3. To succeed when entering college, our students need improved computer and technology skills.

(Office of Assessment, Planning, and Research, 2013).

Students were then surveyed about the three learning needs and asked to identify which statement was most important to them. Forty-nine percent of students ranked student engagement and motivation as their most important learning need (Office of Assessment, Planning, and Research, 2013).

As an additional effort to collect stakeholder perspective two stakeholder groups were identified. The first was a focus group of students enrolled in an academic related student success course (ACA). The entire student group was adult learners ranging from the age of 19 to 58. Nine were enrolled in Applied Sciences programs (Welding, Computer Engineering, Cosmetology, and Early Childhood Education), one was from Business Sciences (Medical Coding), and one came from Health Sciences (Licensed Practical Nursing). Several indicated they were working while others were unemployed. Some had families and others were single with no dependents. The instructor was an Applied Sciences graduate (Building Construction) of ICC, and was included in the group because of the shared student perspective. This was followed by a student services staff survey of the College. The second set of stakeholders selected included staff members from various areas of the College and represented Records, Admissions, Financial Aid, and Learning Support and Retention. This group was selected because their employment responsibilities have a high degree of student impact.

Interview questions regarding student success were developed based on each group's unique perspective. The questions were delivered electronically in survey form to a total of 30 staff members. The survey remained active four days and the response rate was 40 percent. The researchers were available to clarify questions but encouraged staff members to give honest feedback based on personal experience and observation. Several approaches were discussed for the student focus group and the researchers decided on a gallery walk. The questions were posted in different areas of the classroom. After a brief introduction and explanation of the purpose of the exercise, the students were given 15 minutes to walk around the room and record individual responses to each question. The researchers then spent the remainder of the class debriefing the students and discussing each question and its respective response. This open forum was engaging and enlightening for the researchers and allowed time for students to both reflect on and react to responses by classmates, and expand on their initial feedback.

A comparison of findings from each stakeholder group shows similarities in most areas. Both groups showed consistent answers regarding successful college completion. Degree obtainment and goal completion were the top overall responses. While the staff gave more detailed definitions of first-time students, the student group tended to list characteristics they felt best described themselves. The majority of students responded they had either considered leaving school or actually had stopped attending. Both stakeholder groups identified similar attributing factors, with the majority of responses from students being personal in nature, such as time with family and financial. Financial difficulty is one of the reasons given most frequently by early leavers for why they withdraw from ICC (unpublished raw data, 2013; CCCSE, 2012). The staff identified these and additional factors such as communication and motivation. Each of these barriers supported and validated previous findings from the literature. The need for quality advising was a recurring theme for each group. While the approaches were different for each group, the results confirmed the need for a strategic planning initiative to address barriers to success as reality. The results from each stakeholder group are shown in Appendix A.

Using this information as a foundation, a development team was formed to review the literature and identify potential models and target groups to improve Isothermal's curriculum

completion and student success measures. The team was comprised of employees from all curriculum areas of the College. In order to have broad-based input from faculty, representatives from each academic department were assigned. Their assistance was primarily focused on their area of expertise, but each participated on all levels of the project's development. Appropriate staff members who would have a direct role in the development of any initiatives were also included on the team. A student representative was also part of the team as listed below:

- Faculty – Academic Development
- Faculty – Allied Health
- Faculty – Arts and Sciences
- Faculty – Business Sciences
- Director of Practical Nurse Education
- Assistant Registrar and Outreach Specialist – Student Services
- Director of Enrollment Management – Student Services
- Dean of Learning Support and Retention
- Student Government Association President

The “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” improvement plan focuses on improving the first time student experience from the beginning to promote academic success through comprehensive educational planning and increased student retention, progression, and completion rates. The scope of this disquisition was limited to first-time college students who entered Isothermal in the fall 2014 semester. A first-time college student is defined as a credential-seeking full or part-time student who has never been to college after receiving high school credentials, or who has not attended a postsecondary institution within the last five years. With the front door emphasis, these students received critical information related to student success, during the orientation process at the beginning of their academic career at Isothermal. This was reinforced throughout a semester-long success course, and at each meeting with their advisor. Advisors are program-specific experts who are committed to working with students to create program-specific educational plans. In this improvement plan we address the five previously identified barriers to student success:

- Inadequate academic preparation
- Remedial education
- Student financial aid
- Lack of non-academic skills
- Competing obligations

The goal of the improvement plan is to increase ICC's 2014 fall cohort completion rate from 38.6% to 46% by 2020. This will exceed the NCCCS goal of 45.6% established for 2013 through 2015 reporting years. NCCCS will reset the goal in 2016 one standard deviation above the System mean based on 2016 reporting data. Because overall completion numbers for the initiative will not be available until 2020, the projected effectiveness of the plan will be formatively assessed through other intermediate success indicators. One indicator is semester-to-semester re-enrollment or retention rates. Another is progression, or the completion of 12 credit hours within the student's first academic year. The benchmark for the program is to increase fall-fall retention from 43% to 50% by 2015, fall-to spring retention from 67% to 75% by 2016, and progression from 67.8% to 75% by 2016, which exceeds the NCCCS goal (ICC Records Office, 2013 & 2014; NCCCS, 2014).

PART II: INTERVENTION DESIGN

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count is a national initiative launched in 2003 by the Lumina Foundation with the primary mission to improve outcomes for community college students with a particular interest in improving outcomes for students of color and low-income students. The initiative includes more than 200 community colleges and four universities from 36 states ([www.achievingthedream.org](http://www.achievingthedream.org), 2015). Achieving the Dream requires participating colleges to collect longitudinal data on entering cohorts of students to develop a “culture of inquiry and evidence” when designing new improvement efforts aimed at student success (Kerrigan and Slater, 2010, p. 2). In order to guide colleges successfully, Achieving the Dream has created a five-step improvement process:

1. Commit: The senior leadership of the college must commit to the improvement effort by supporting policy change and allocating needed resources to support the improvement effort.
2. Use data to prioritize actions: Colleges must use longitudinal data to identify gaps in student achievement and prioritize improvement plans.
3. Engage stakeholders: College utilizes faculty, staff, and other internal and external stakeholders to develop focused strategies to address problems.
4. Implement, evaluate, improve: Equivalent to a Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycle described by Langley; Moen; Nolan, K; Nolan, T; Norman, & Provost. (2009), colleges must implement a change and then carefully evaluate and make adjustments to improve the effort.
5. Establish a culture of continuous improvement: Careful study into how all changes and funding allocations affect student success becomes the norm.

(Kerrigan & Slater, 2010)

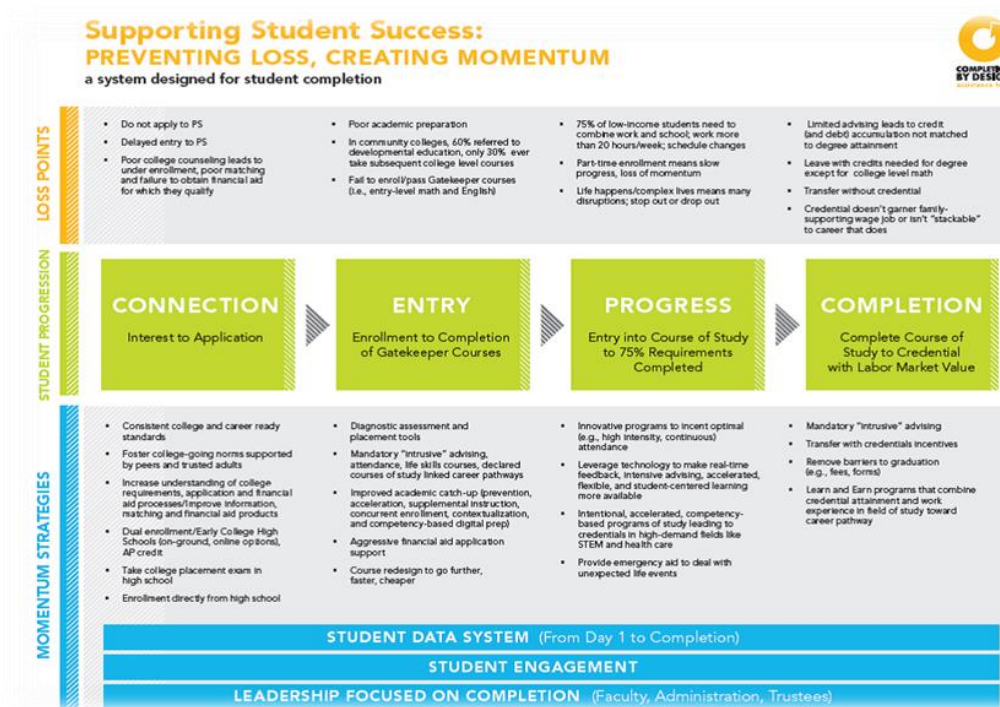
The Completion by Design initiative sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has been adopted by many states and is reflected in North Carolina’s SuccessNC initiative (Nodine, Venezia, & Bracco, 2011; [www.successnc.org](http://www.successnc.org)). The four key objectives of the initiative



are to (1) raise completion rates for large numbers of students, (2) contain costs, (3) maintain open access, and (4) ensure quality.

To achieve these objectives, Completion by Design advocates for the development of completion pathways for students that integrate institutional policies, practices, and programs designed to maximize student progress at each step of the process (Nodine et al., 2011). Essentially, there are four major steps through a completion pathway for students. They are (1) connection, (2) entry, (3) progress, and (4) completion. (See Figure 6).

Figure 6-Completion by Design Momentum Framework



Source: [www.successnc.org](http://www.successnc.org)

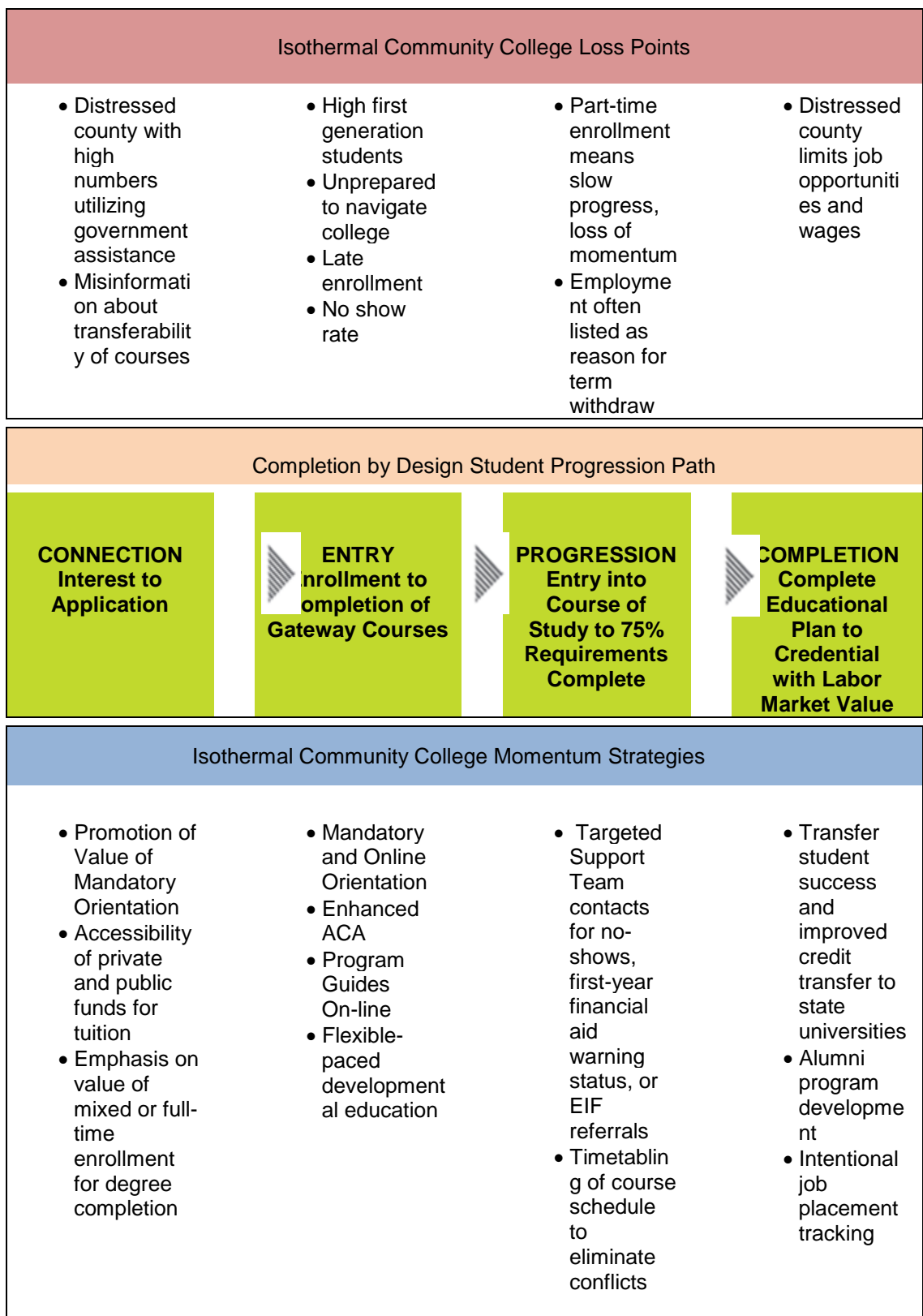
The design elements of both Achieving the Dream and Completion by Design can be seen in many models of improvement found in the literature. While Completion by Design has been formally adopted by NCCCS to guide system-wide improvement efforts, there are community colleges within North Carolina that are also participating in Achieving the Dream including Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, Central Piedmont Community College, Guildford Technical Community College, and Gaston College ("Achieving the Dream",

2012). The models are capable of working hand in hand with each other to have the greatest effect upon student success. The improvement plan for ICC most closely aligns with the Completion by Design initiative and focuses on the last three components within the student loss/momentum framework: (1) entry, (2) progression, and (3) completion (See Figure 7).

The literature provides evidence that it is critical to address barriers that prevent students from achieving their goals at the beginning of their college experience. Therefore, getting started on the right foot with strong supports to build “college knowledge”; engaging with peers, mentors, and advisors; and developing clear academic and life plans help students to be more successful.

All first-time enrollees should be initially targeted for additional supports to build college knowledge from the beginning and start to develop strong connections and skills to navigate through the entire college environment. These students need career counseling and advising from the beginning. This will ensure that they have clear, long-term academic plans to achieve their ultimate career goals to determine if they are truly in the right program of study (Tinto, 2012).

Figure 7- ICC Completion by Design Student Progression Path



### Summary of Potential Models

- In CCCSE's 2013 second installment of "A Matter of Degrees", several high-impact practices designed to increase student engagement were highlighted. Those that would most impact students at the entry point of college are academic goal setting and planning including proactive advising, orientation, fast-track developmental education, first year experience, and student success course enrollment (CCCSE, 2013).
- ACT's 2010 article, *What Works in Student Retention*, highlighted a four-pronged approach including:
  1. Require first time students to attend orientation with online orientation programs available
  2. Require students to take a college success course
  3. Provide greater financial aid awareness
  4. Use proactive academic, personal, and career advising and counseling
- Howard Community College, in Maryland identified intrusive advising and orientation as components that contributed to its graduation and transfer rate of 40.9 percent compared to the 33.7 percent state average. Study skills are highlighted in weekly advising sessions for students in their Step-Up program (Zalaznick, 2015).
- Santa Fe College implemented a Pathways to Persistence program for GED graduates who had become first-time college students. During their first year, 54.8 percent of GED graduates drop out, largely due to a lack of support. The program aims to create sustained connections during weekly meetings with student mentors. More than 50 percent of the pilot cohort completed their first semester with a GPA of 3.0 or higher (Thompson, 2012).
- California's Ventura College's Promise program combines financial scholarship, peer mentoring, and educational planning. Required placement testing and career counseling are also required for participants. Ventura reported a 90 percent fall to spring retention rate and 50 percent higher fall to fall retention rate for Promise scholarship recipients (Pierce, 2015).

- Valencia Community College, in Orlando, Florida, implemented LifeMap in their efforts to increase success by focusing on the front door of the college (Shugart & Romano, 2006).

Through LifeMap, Valencia established five primary goals:

1. Use a developmental advising model that promotes social and academic integration
2. Develop student planning and goal setting
3. Create normative expectation that students have life, career, and academic goals
4. Establish a digital system to develop and document these goals
5. Document the achievement of goals

Three years after implementing their LifeMap initiative, Valencia's graduation or transfer rate was 51% compared to 39% for the national average (Adam, 2012). To achieve these goals they instituted several changes including:

1. Set application deadlines and enforced them.
2. Assessed, advised, and oriented students before class.
3. Students needing additional support attended the Bridges to Success program.
4. Flex start classes were created.
5. Student coaches were paid a stipend to repeat a course as a Supplemental Instructor to help students be successful in more difficult courses.

- Century College in Minnesota created a similar program in 2006 named GPS LifePlan (Century College, GPS Plan, 2008). GPS LifePlan is a holistic program designed to help students plan for their futures and features five areas of development:

1. Career
2. Education
3. Finance
4. Leadership
5. Personal

In each area, students are encouraged to take assessments, set goals, and create plans.

The program contains three components:

1. The GPS Website

2. eFolio (student-owned virtual portfolio)
  3. Campus workshops and events
- El Paso Community College (EPCC) followed the design principles of Achieving the Dream to implement several initiatives aimed at boosting student success. These initiatives centered around two goals:
    1. To help prospective students improve their readiness for college to reduce or eliminate developmental courses.
    2. To reduce the time required to complete developmental coursework

To achieve these goals, EPCC began collaborating with area high schools to improve student knowledge of the placement test and tested them while in high school. Students were then given interventions to refresh skills while still in high school and were then retested. Students still needing developmental courses were allowed to enroll in a summer bridge program (Kerrigan & Slater, 2010). College ready student test scores rose from 30% to 35%. Students placing in the lowest level of developmental decreased from 31% to 22% (2010).

- Proactive Advising Models: Proactive advising, also referred to as intrusive advising, builds structures for students that include intervention strategies for students who might not otherwise seek help (NACADA, 2013). These models generally employ the use of professional, full-time advisors who are trained by department faculty for specific programs and who can fully interact with program experts to enhance advising for students.
  1. Completion Agenda: A Call to Action advocates that completion must be imbedded into the fabric of the institution by focusing on rigor, relevance, and relationships. Student engagement can be improved through communication such as telephone calls, emails to students, and utilization of student groups to foster engagement through peer support (McPhail, 2011).
  2. Zane State College, in Ohio, introduced proactive advising to boost retention for underprepared, at-risk students. Students who were connected and successfully completed the first year had a 90% chance of graduating within three years. The

completion rate for developmental English courses rose from 44% to 67% and the rate for developmental math completion rose from 14% to 35% since the implementation of the advising model (CCCSE, 2013).

3. The City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) program requires its full time cohort students to meet bi-weekly with advisors. The program is a coordinated effort to retain students by eliminating financial barriers and providing a support network. The two-year graduation rate for the 900 students in the pilot was 50 percent versus a 20 percent graduation rate for other students (Zalaznick, 2016).
- The University of South Carolina (USC) implemented a proactive advising model centered around coaching students toward academic success and engagement on campus. In the two-pronged framework, coaches helped students develop academic plans focusing on self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting. Engagement plans are then developed focusing on assessment of current involvement on campus, mind-mapping techniques, and learning outcomes to help them identify opportunities and resources for getting connected on campus. Assessment of the model indicated that 92% of students referred to the coaching center improved their GPA and demonstrated academic improvement. In addition, 40% fewer students were suspended than predicted (Robinson & Gahagan, 2010).

## Recommendations for Action

By focusing on student entry and identifying various loss points that prevent students from successfully connecting with their college environment, Isothermal Community College has the opportunity to positively impact the greatest number of students as previously demonstrated through the previously described models. Therefore, the improvement initiative focuses on three identified improvement efforts similar to those employed at Valencia Community College. Valencia's approach was to encourage students to become engaged early with advisors, helping them develop both academic and life plans- ultimately, enabling them to maintain a steady course toward completing their identified goals.

At Isothermal, an implementation team was formed to take the recommendations from the Development team and formulate a plan for putting them into practice. Again, in an effort to maintain broad-based input, this team was comprised of employees from all curriculum areas of the College. The Advising Center Coordinator joined the group because a main component of the intervention is being handled in that area. The administration of Isothermal recognized that the Applied Sciences program area was too expansive and reorganized programs into two separate departments: Applied Science and Engineering and Health and Public Services. These changes took place between the Development and Intervention stages, and allowed for additional faculty representation. Some members from the Development team remained and were joined by additional representatives from each academic department:

- Faculty – Academic Development
- Faculty – Arts and Sciences (2)
- Faculty – Business Sciences (2)
- Faculty – Applied Science and Engineering (2)
- Faculty- Health and Public Service (1)
- Director of Practical Nurse Education
- Director of Enrollment Management – Student Services
- Registrar – Student Services
- Director – Learning Support and Retention



- Advising Center Coordinator
- Support Staff – Arts and Sciences
- Student Government Association President

The Implementation team was charged with the following student success interventions:

1. Implement mandatory orientation for all new students.
  - a. Develop an online orientation.
  - b. Orientation should focus on the core things students need to know in the first two to three weeks of school.
    - i. Technology access
      1. Moodle
      2. Patriot Port
      3. Email
    - ii. Financial aid knowledge to maintain financial aid eligibility
    - iii. Student Support Services
      1. Supplemental instruction
      2. Career and personal counseling
      3. Tutoring
      4. Childcare assistance
    - iv. Communicating effectively with instructors
2. Adopt an advising model for all first-time students using the advising center similar to USC's Academic Centers of Excellence (ACE) Office. The first advising session should focus on establishing goals and educational plans in a similar manner to Century College's GPS LifePlan. One of the first objectives of the session should be to establish students' goals and assure that they are in the correct program of study to achieve those goals. Students should come out of their first semester experience with the knowledge to navigate Patriot Port and a master academic plan (MAP) based on their developmental needs and their long-term goals. Registration and advising are completely separate acts and it is imperative that a distinct separation between the functions exists (Schuermer,

2013). Registering for classes is not the primary goal of the session. Advisors should have student development backgrounds and academic coaching should be their priority. They should be housed in a central location with other student services to reduce the likelihood of first-time students becoming lost in the process of navigating the campus early on. They should be trained to advise across program areas with the expertise of the faculty (King, 2002). The proactive advising model may vary from department to department based on the specific needs of departments. It was the recommendation of the Development team that Business Science, Health and Public Service, and Applied Sciences and Engineering students be connected with a faculty advisor for more detailed advising for specific classes and course sequences after the advising center has met with the students to discuss academic plans, developmental needs, and life goals. It is recommended that Arts and Sciences students remain in the Advising Center with access to full time advisors so that they can continue to benefit from additional proactive advising to monitor long-term goals. Access to the Advising Center may need to be extended for students in developmental courses so that they stay connected with more intensive support and for students at risk for being on academic alert. This can be done as a supplement to the faculty advisor. Special attention should be directed toward at-risk and transitional students since many do not possess adequate college knowledge and are less prepared for the transition into collegiate studies (Schuermer, 2013).

3. Require mandatory registration into student success course, ACA 115 or 122, within the first two semesters. Research shows that students who take a success course early are more successful than students who take it later or never take the course (Cho & Karp, 2013). Success courses allow students a longer opportunity than orientation alone or a single advising session to build relationships with instructors and students and to make connections to resources on campus to help them navigate college. There is a positive correlation between student engagement and success. This combination helps students connect to both their program of study and the institution. Research also indicates that

there is an increase in student retention and grade point average, GPA, when students are enrolled in a success course (Allen, 2012).

- a. Explore the possibility of creating program specific sections of ACA for learning communities. Business Sciences and the Basic Law Enforcement Training program have piloted this successfully. ACA 122 for Associate of Arts and Sciences students will already provide the framework for a learning community for this group of students. Other program areas that may benefit from a cohort section of ACA 115 include pre-health science, early childhood education, and industrial technology. It would still be beneficial for students to have the option of general ACA 115 sections if they are undecided about their program at the beginning.
- b. In order to fulfill this recommendation, there will need to be an increased number of sections available. In the fall 2013 semester, there were only 13 sections of ACA 115 offered. Three sections were offered at 11 am on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Only one section was offered on Monday and Wednesday during the day at 11 am. There were two evening sections. Most of the sections were isolated on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Careful exploration of scheduling practices should be considered in order for students to be able to fit ACA in their schedule within the first two semesters.

## **Description of Intervention Plan Components and Implementation Timeline**

The Development team proposed a three-pronged intervention plan in December 2013 to improve student completion rates at Isothermal Community College by focusing on getting students started on a strong footing through their first semester. All new students were given the opportunity to participate in the proposed interventions. However, the interventions will not be made mandatory for all new students until multiple PDSA cycles have been completed to review data and make adjustments to the process.

### **Intervention 1: Mandatory Orientation**

At full implementation, ICC will require all first-time students to complete orientation within the first semester of attendance. This will be implemented by controlling registration using registration blocks on student accounts that prohibit further registration until an orientation quiz is completed with a 100% grade with unlimited attempts. The orientation will be provided in a face-to-face setting the day before classes begin each term or online for those students unable to attend the face-to-face session.

The content of orientation is focused on what critical things students need to know within the first two to three weeks of beginning college. There are five module areas of content: (1) welcome and campus life and culture, (2) campus safety, student records, and important policy information, (3) technology resources, (4) financial aid policy information, and (5) educational planning (see Appendix B). Educational planning is where the MAP is introduced and the importance of enrolling in ACA early is emphasized. The MAP concepts are reemphasized in each of the module areas as well. A pilot version of the orientation was delivered in Fall 2014. After module revisions from various feedback methods, a revised orientation was conducted in Fall 2015 and online development was initiated. An additional orientation will be conducted in Spring 2016 utilizing finalized module content with a pilot online orientation being tested during the Spring 2016 term. Mandatory orientation will become effective for students entering in the Fall 2016 term.

**Intervention 2: Mandatory Registration in Student Success Course**

At full implementation, ICC will require all first-time students to take ACA 115 or 122 within the first two semesters of their academic program. A success course gives students regular contact with an instructor and students to connect with and rely on for support. The preference is that students take the course in the first semester, but allowing two semesters will accommodate any scheduling issues students may experience in the first semester that prevents registration. Again, this requirement will be managed using registration blocks on students' accounts, with limited exemptions granted (see Appendix C).

To further improve this component of the program, a subcommittee worked through the 2014-2015 academic year to revise the ACA curriculum to make it more meaningful and current for today's students. The primary change made to the curriculum was to build a set of common assignments that take each of the five orientation modules and expand upon it making the ACA course an extended orientation. The major task implemented with the new ACA course was the development of the MAP. The MAP assignment contains several different components to help the students begin to develop their individual program of study and customize it to their goals and timeframe (see Appendix D). By being required to take ACA early, students will develop their own goals, plan more quickly and see their pathway to completion. Three sections of ACA 122 were piloted in Fall 2015 using the new curriculum. Eight sections will be piloted in the Spring 2016 term. All sections of ACA will use the new curriculum content beginning Fall 2016 and the mandatory enrollment criteria for students will go into place at that time as well.

**Intervention 3: Proactive Advising**

Proactive advising occurs each semester prior to students registering for classes. The initial advising appointment focuses on discussing academic and professional goals with the students and aligning goals with program decisions. This session also involves refining goals based on testing information and changing majors. The advisor should review program outlines to help students understand the sequence of classes leading to graduation (see Appendix E).

The importance of student engagement on campus will also be discussed with the students at this time.

Once the MAP assignment is completed in the ACA course, most students should be able to proceed through their plan with minimal intervention. Each semester, however, students will meet with their advisors to review their progress with their MAP and make revisions if needed or offer reassurance that progress is being made. Students will not be allowed to register for subsequent terms unless they have met with an advisor who will remove their registration restriction.

For students who are struggling with their MAP and find themselves in a roadblock in their progression, a more intensive intervention is necessary. Through the use of proactive advising an Early Intervention Team will be implemented to work intensively with students who are struggling. A teacher or advisor can identify students directly using an Early Intervention Form when students show at-risk behaviors in class such as poor attendance, missing assignments, etc. In addition to instructor identification, the Early Intervention Team will monitor other risk factor data such as course “no shows” and financial aid warning statuses to proactively seek out students to work with more intensively. With the help of the Early Intervention Team, students will develop a new MAP or other action plans to help them structure a path back on course with their MAP.

Isothermal has embedded the MAP process in each component of the “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” program to help students start on the strongest possible footing for long term success and eventual completion. By being intentional about the comprehensive educational planning process and stringing a common theme throughout each interaction a student may have on campus, the College is helping to ensure that students meet their goals and that ICC is successful at creating a learning environment that promotes student progress and completion.

## **Primary Division of Responsibilities**

### **Alice McCluney**

Alice McCluney was primarily responsible for the development and implementation of the orientation and success course interventions of the improvement plan. Alice was also chiefly responsible for data analysis of the collected data after pilot implementation of all interventions. Development of orientation included conducting PDSA cycles with the orientation subcommittee to develop and refine the content of the orientation as well as develop an assessment quiz to be administered to all orientation participants. Orientation development also included an online version to be made available for distance learning students. In addition to the development of the orientation, Alice was principally responsible for implementing the orientation and tracking students to ensure that they completed the orientation.

### **PDSA cycles for intervention 1: Mandatory orientation.**

Cycle 1: August 2014

- Test run of orientation using five major modules: 1) welcome and campus life, 2) Technology resources, 3) Advising basics, 4) Financial Aid, 5) Safety and Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act/policies information
  - Include survey to assess weak and strong points and guide development of next cycle
  - Meet with parties involved in development and delivery of orientation to review survey feedback and experiences from the event.
  - Revise modules according to feedback
  - Develop assessment quiz

Cycle 2: February 2015

- Run revised orientation modules with faculty and staff: 1) Welcome and campus life/engagement opportunities, 2) Technology resources, 3) Educational Planning, 4) Financial Aid- How do I keep it? 5) Campus Safety, Resources, and Need to Knows

- Meet with parties involved in development and delivery to assess 2<sup>nd</sup> orientation and assessment results
- Revise modules
- Begin development of the online modules mirrored to revised face-to-face modules

#### Cycle 3: August 2015

- Run revised orientation modules
- Refine online modules to align with revised face-to-face modules
  - Include revised assessment quiz
  - Study results with the orientation group
  - Make final adjustments to the quiz and modules
  - Finalize online modules and quiz to match

#### Cycle 4: January 2016

- Run orientation for all new students with finalized content and assessment quiz
  - Meet with orientation team to review logistical issues that may arise with the mandatory implementation to begin planning future PDSA cycles to resolve implementation issues
- Pilot test online orientation format with selected ACA 122 and 115 sections
  - Review focus group feedback from pilot groups to revise online content

Alice was also primarily responsible for the development of the student success course (ACA 115 or 122) to expand upon the initial concepts introduced in orientation. Success course development included creating assessment instruments to document that students have engaged with various resources on campus to develop a Master Academic Plan. Alice was also chiefly responsible for implementing mandatory enrollment into a student success course within the first two semesters of enrollment and managing student restrictions to ensure the course is completed.

Alice was essentially responsible for performing statistical analyses with the selected pilot group participating in the interventions. The analyses determined if the interventions had a



significant influence on the performance, progression, and retention of the students in the pilot group.

### **Vanessa Capps**

Vanessa Capps was mostly responsible for the development and implementation of the advising and educational planning intervention and the marketing of the entire improvement plan. Vanessa was also largely responsible for the collection of data after pilot implementation of all interventions. Development of advising and educational planning included conducting PDSA cycles with the Educational Planning subcommittee. Through this process a template was developed for use by all advisors and included common elements. In addition to the development, Vanessa was primarily responsible for advisor training and implementation of the educational planning template.

### **PDSA Cycles for Intervention 3: Proactive Advising.**

Cycle 1: February 2015

- The semester registration information session was divided into two separate sessions with smaller faculty groups
- Groups were given student scenarios that served as advising quizzes
  - New topics included developmental Math and English requirements, course substitutions, Program of Study, catalog, and placement testing changes

Cycle 2: October 2015

- Registration information sessions were mandatory for all full time faculty. Any adjunct faculty or staff members responsible for assisting with registration or advising were also encouraged to attend.
  - Offerings increased to 10 small group sessions with a total attendance of 96
  - “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” was the central focus of the sessions. New topics included Dynamic Advising, Early Intervention, the Instructor Toolkit in Moodle, and the importance of goal-setting.
  - IT staff participated in the sessions and spoke with faculty about access and training.

Cycle 3: February 2016

- Mandatory small group sessions will again be held, focusing on Early Intervention, further use of Program Outlines and MAP's, and more in-depth elements of Dynamic Advising.

Vanessa served on the orientation team and was generally responsible for the Student Records portion of new student orientation. This section covers FERPA and other policies regarding student information. Vanessa works with each department to ensure correct information is consistently disseminated to students. Additionally, Vanessa continues to be primarily responsible for maintaining the Student Records webpage and College Catalog, and is the first point of contact regarding issues and questions regarding student records.

Vanessa was also chiefly responsible for the development of a comprehensive marketing plan for the entire "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." Program (see Appendix F). Marketing plan development included creating many different deliverables with the assistance of the marketing subcommittee to project a consistent message across campus. In addition, Vanessa was responsible for working with team members to ensure that marketing messages were released on schedule. This committee was made up of faculty and staff members with relevant experience with or expertise in program areas of marketing, audio and video broadcasting, advertising and graphic design:

- Director of Marketing and Community Relations
- Webmaster
- Registrar – Student Services
- Director of Learning Support and Retention
- Print Shop Manager
- Faculty – Applied Science and Engineering (2)
- Faculty – Business Sciences

Vanessa was principally responsible for the collection of pilot group data that were analyzed for statistical significance. These data reports included 1) Academic Alert and GPA 2) Fall-to-

spring re-enrollment 3) Fall-to fall re-enrollment, and 4) completion of 12 credit hours at the end of one academic year for new students.

While each researcher had distinct primary responsibilities, there were multiple instances of overlap and assistance from one another in implementation, collection, and analysis of data.

## METHODOLOGY

We contend that by (1) incorporating a mandatory orientation program, (2) promoting a heightened emphasis on first-year success courses, and (3) providing professional advising sessions, persistence, progression, and completion rates at Isothermal Community College will increase.

An action research design using ex-post facto data along with survey and focus groups was used to implement the interventions. Collecting data regarding student completion rates as performed by the North Carolina Community College System was not possible in the time constraint of the study period as completion data are collected on cohorts of students after six years from their first term of entry. Once the three intervention strategies are implemented, there will be a period of six years before results from the implementation would be reported at the state level. To compensate for this gap of state level data, internal data were collected from Isothermal Community College's student data management system to monitor student persistence and progression from semester to semester and student grade point average. These data allowed the researchers to gather results and make predictions regarding the potential success or failure of the intervention strategies in increasing completion rates for the College as a whole. Assessment indicators include, but are not limited to: academic alert reports, satisfaction surveys, and institutional reports (enrollment analysis, CCSSE survey, NCCCS performance measures).

### Variables

The independent variables between the students are:

1. Participation in orientation prior to the beginning of the semester
2. Meeting with academic advisors to begin developing a MAP prior to registration for classes
3. Enrollment in student success course within the first two semesters to fully develop MAP

The dependent variables are:

1. Continued enrollment from semester to semester

2. Accrual of college credits at a rate of 12 credit hours per year
3. Grade Point Average of 2.0 or higher

### **Data Collection**

The data were collected each semester using enrollment data housed in Isothermal's student management system and compared to data being reported to state and federal reporting agencies that track student progress and completion. Qualitative data were collected in the form of surveys and course evaluations administered after orientations, advising sessions, and completion of ACA 115 or 122.

### **Pilot Cohort Selection**

Isothermal requires that all students receive proactive advising prior to registration. Each semester, the registrar places a restriction on each student's academic record. This is controlled on the Colleague student management system. This restriction is removed by advisors at the conclusion of the advising session. For the fall 2014 semester, 424 first time students were advised and enrolled. First time college students applying to Isothermal for the Fall 2014 term were mailed invitations for the orientation. First time college students are defined as credential seeking full or part time students who have never been to college after receiving high school credentials, or have not attended a postsecondary institution within the last five years.

The pilot New Student Orientation was held on August 12 and 14, 2014. Follow-up emails were sent out, announcements were posted to the Isothermal Facebook page and website, and students were encouraged to register for an orientation date while meeting with their advisors and during testing sessions. A total of 131 students attended an orientation session for the 2014 fall semester. Of the 131 students, 67 or 51% registered for and successfully completed a success course within the first two semesters of initial enrollment. This number represents the final 2014 fall cohort of students receiving all three interventions.

In addition to the full pilot cohort of students receiving all interventions, a second pilot of the refined ACA curriculum emphasizing the development of the MAP with students was

conducted in the Fall 2015 term. Three sections of ACA 122 were taught using the revised curriculum. Comparisons of the student performance between the three pilot sections and all other sections of ACA 115 and 122 were made to evaluate the significance of the new curriculum in strengthening the overall intervention plan. Sixty students enrolled in the pilot sections and 241 students enrolled in all other sections of the success courses.

## RESULTS

### Grade Point Average

Isothermal requires students to maintain a 2.0 or “C” average GPA to remain in good academic standing. Students who do not maintain this GPA are placed on Academic Alert that requires them to meet with their advisor for more intensive advising to revise their MAP and set goals to improve the GPA. This GPA also serves as an indicator of student success as students who drop below 2.0 are also at risk for losing their financial aid.

In September, 2015, the GPAs of the students in the complete intervention cohort were analyzed after a full academic year of coursework and compared to those of students who only received part of the interventions. The students receiving proactive advising and orientation had an average GPA of 2.37. Of this group, 65% had a GPA of 2.0 or higher. The average GPA of the students receiving proactive advising, orientation, and successfully completing a success course was 2.93 with 79% having a GPA of 2.0 or higher. The average GPA for the complete group of first time students (n=424) was 2.45 with 69% receiving a 2.0 or higher GPA. (See table 2).

Table 2

Grade Point Average Comparison of Full Intervention Group to Total New Student Population

	Number of Students	Average GPA	Percent of students with 2.0 or higher GPA
<b>All new students Fall 2014</b>	n=424	2.45	69%
<b>New students attending orientation Fall 2014</b>	n=131	2.37	65%
<b>New Students attending orientation and completing a success course</b>	n=67	2.93	79%

(ICC, 2015)

## Retention

Retention is defined as students enrolling in one term and subsequently re-enrolling in future terms. This project examines fall 2014 enrollment to spring 2015 re-enrollment and fall 2014 enrollment to fall 2015 re-enrollment. Fall to spring retention usually closely mirrors first year progression rates.

The fall 2014-to-spring 2015 retention rate for the entire ICC population was 70% and the fall 2014-to-fall 2015 retention rate was 46%. The students receiving orientation and proactive advising had a fall 2014-to-spring 2015 retention rate of 75% and a fall 2014-to-fall 2015 retention rate of 60%. The students from this group who also completed a student success course had a fall 2014-to-spring 2015 retention rate of 87% and a fall 2014-to-fall 2015 retention rate of 75%. (See Table 3).

Table 3

Term to Term Retention Comparison of Full Intervention Group to Total New Student Population

	<b>Number of Students</b>	<b>Fall 2014 to Spring 2015 Retention Rate</b>	<b>Fall 2014 to Fall 2015 Retention Rate</b>
<b>All new students Fall 2014</b>	n=424	60%	49%
<b>New students attending orientation Fall 2014</b>	n=131	75%	60%
<b>New Students attending orientation and completing a success course</b>	n=67	87%	75%

(ICC, 2015)

## Progression

First year progression is defined as completing 12 credit hours within the first academic year of enrollment (fall, spring, summer). The students receiving proactive advising and orientation earned an average of 20.92 credits with 71% earning at least 12+ credits within the first academic year. Students also completing a success course within the first two semesters earned an average of 24 credits with 90% earning at least 12 credits in the first academic year.



Comparatively, all first-time students earned an average of 19.36 credits in the first academic year with 60% earning a minimum of 12 credit hours. (See table 4).

Table 4

First-Year Progression Comparison of Full Intervention Group to Total New Student Population

	Number of Students	Average Number of Credits Earned in Year One	Percent of new students completing at least 12 credits in Year One
All first-time students Fall 2014	n=424	19.36	60%
First-time students attending orientation Fall 2014	n=131	20.92	71%
First-Time students attending orientation and completing a success course	n=67	24	90%

(ICC, 2015)

#### Fall 2015 Success Course Pilot

Students enrolled in a success course during the fall 2015 term were placed into two groups: those in the three pilot sections with revised content and those enrolled in a standard section with older content. The two groups were compared based on four areas: (1) GPA (2) progression of credit hour attainment, (3) retention from fall 2015 to spring 2016 semesters, and (4) grade distribution for the ACA course.

**Grade point average.** The students who enrolled in a pilot section of ACA had an average GPA of 2.46 while students enrolled in all other sections of ACA 115 or 122 had a slightly higher average GPA of 2.51. However, the pilot sections had a higher percentage of students with a minimum 2.0 GPA or higher at 76.7% compared to the standard sections at 70% (see table 5).

Table 5

## Grade Point Average Comparison Pilot Success Course Sections to Standard Sections

	Number of Students	Average GPA	Percent of students with 2.0 or higher GPA
<b>Students enrolled in standard sections of ACA 115 or 122 Fall 2015</b>	n=241	2.51	70%
<b>Students enrolled in pilot sections of ACA 122</b>	n=60	2.46	76.7%

(ICC, 2016)

**Retention.** Isothermal saw 65.7% of the total student population return from the fall 2015 semester to the spring 2016 semester at preliminary review. Students who enrolled in the standard sections of ACA returned at a rate of 77.6%, while students in the pilot sections returned at a very similar rate of 76.7% (see table 6).

Table 6

## Fall-to-Spring Retention Rate Comparison Pilot Success Course Sections to Standard Sections

	Number of Students	Fall 2015 to Spring 2016 Retention Rate
<b>Total student Population</b>	n=1734	65.7%
<b>Students enrolled in standard sections of ACA 115 or 122 Fall 2015</b>	n=241	77.6%
<b>Students enrolled in pilot sections of ACA 122</b>	n=60	76.7%

(ICC, 2016)

**Progression.** Credit hour progression results were very similar between the two groups. Students enrolled in a standard section of ACA earned an average of 23.63 credits, while students in the pilot sections earned slightly more credits at 24.23 credits. Standard sections of ACA saw 71% of students earning at least 12 credits, while the pilot group earned just slightly more at 71.7% (See table 7). It should be noted that the students enrolled in ACA may not be first semester students.

Table 7

## Progression Comparison Pilot Success Course Sections to Standard Sections

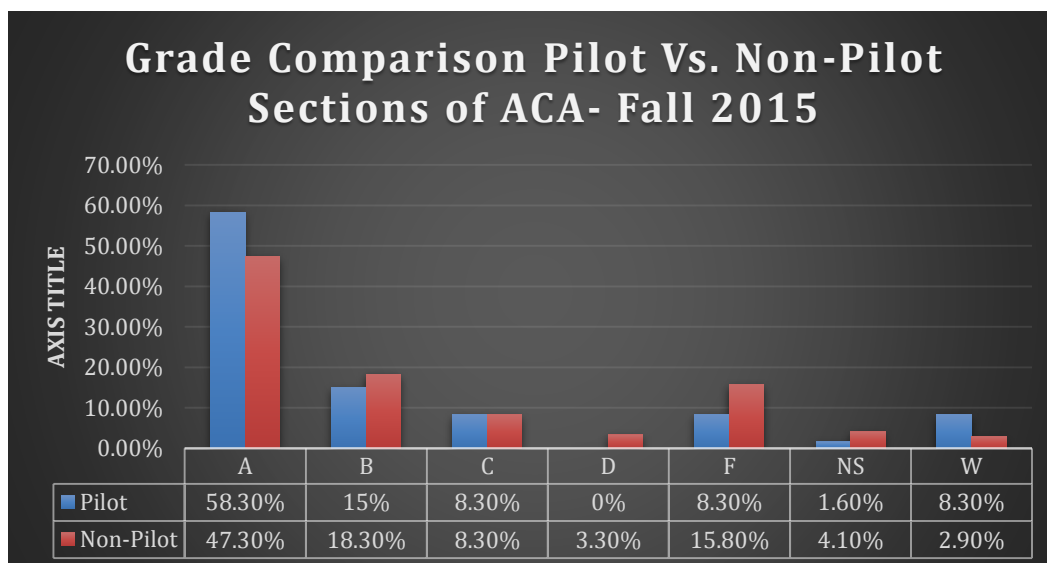
	Number of Students	Average Number of Credits Earned	Percent of new students completing at least 12 credits
Students enrolled in standard sections of ACA 115 or 122 Fall 2015	n=241	23.63	71%
Students enrolled in pilot sections of ACA 122	n=60	24.23	71.7%

(ICC, 2016)

**Grade Distribution.** The area of grade distribution indicated the greatest area of difference between the standard sections and pilot sections of ACA. The pilot sections of ACA 122 awarded 58.3% A's; 15% B's; 8.3% C's, F's, and Withdrawals; and 1.6% No Shows. Standard sections awarded 47.3% A's, 18.3% B's, 8.3% C's, 3.3% D's, 15.8% F's, 4.1% Now Shows, and 2.9% Withdrawals

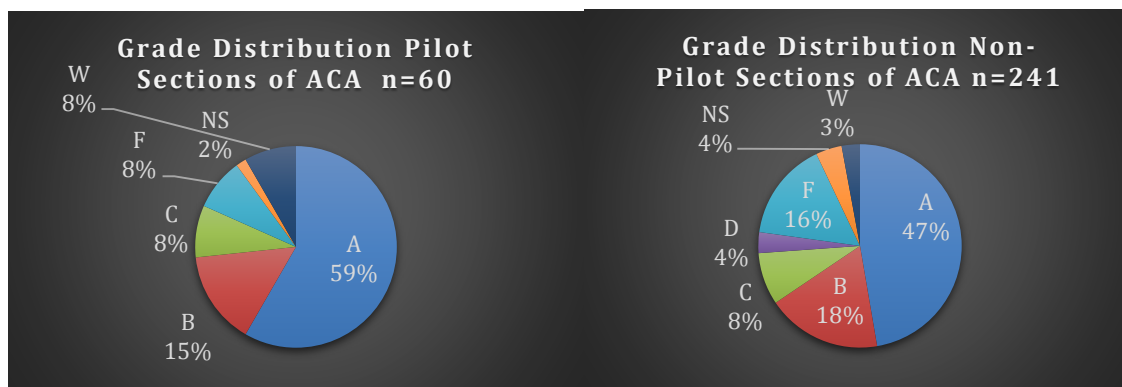
(See Figures 8 &amp; 9).

Figure 8-Grade Comparison for Pilot Sections of Success Course to Non-Pilot Sections



(ICC, 2016)

Figure 9- Grade Distribution Comparison for Pilot Sections of Success Course to Non-Pilot Sections

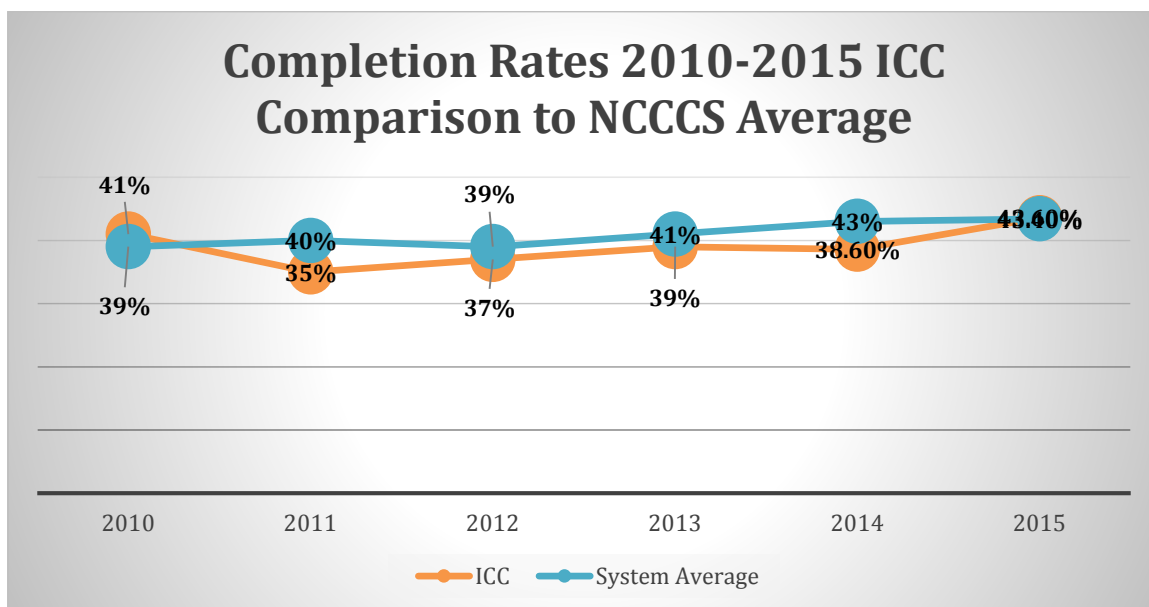


(ICC, 2016)

### 2015 NC Performance Measures

Significant improvements on the statewide performance measures are not expected until several years after the implementation of the improvement initiatives. However, the 2015 results for Isothermal indicated that we have made gains in both first year progression and curriculum completion. As part of the marketing and culture changing process, the implementation team presented the “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” initiative to many different committees and all academic departments on campus. A large portion of these presentations was spent discussing how the performance measures were calculated. This led to a greater understanding of how faculty can impact the performance measures directly with their students. Many faculty did not realize that they could encourage their students to apply to graduate from a certificate or diploma program while still taking courses. This led to a significant increase in the number of graduation applications received and processed for Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 terms, which led to a higher curriculum completion rate on the 2015 Performance Measures. Isothermal improved the curriculum completion rate from 39% in 2014 to 43.6% for 2015, which exceeds the statewide average of 43.4% (NCCCS, 2015). (See figure 10).

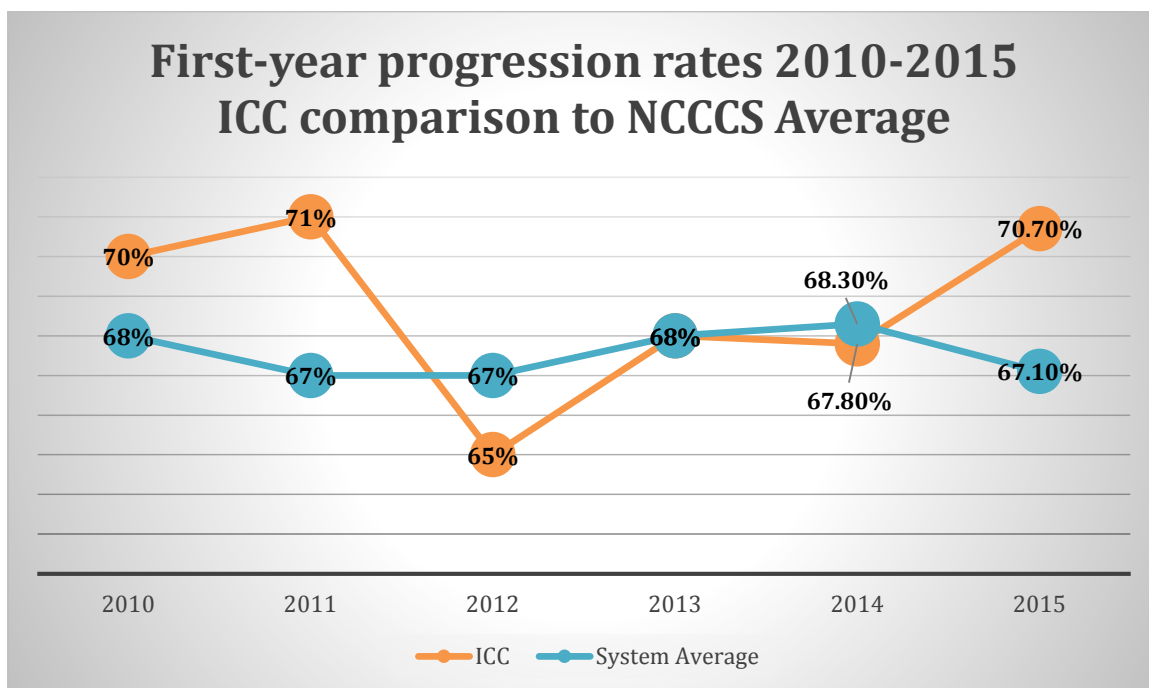
Figure 10- NCCCS Average Completion Rates 2010-2015 Comparison to ICC



(NCCCS, 2015 & ICC Records Office, 2014 & 2015)

Another topic that was brought to light through these cross campus presentations was the impact of part time enrollment on student progression. Faculty began talking to students more when scheduling classes and encouraging them to attempt more credits to improve their progression toward their degree. As such, the progression rate for Isothermal improved from 68% for 2014 to 70.7% for 2015, which exceeds the system wide average of 67% (NCCCS, 2015) (See figure 11).

Figure 11-NCCCS First-Year Progression Rate Average 2010-2015 Comparison to ICC



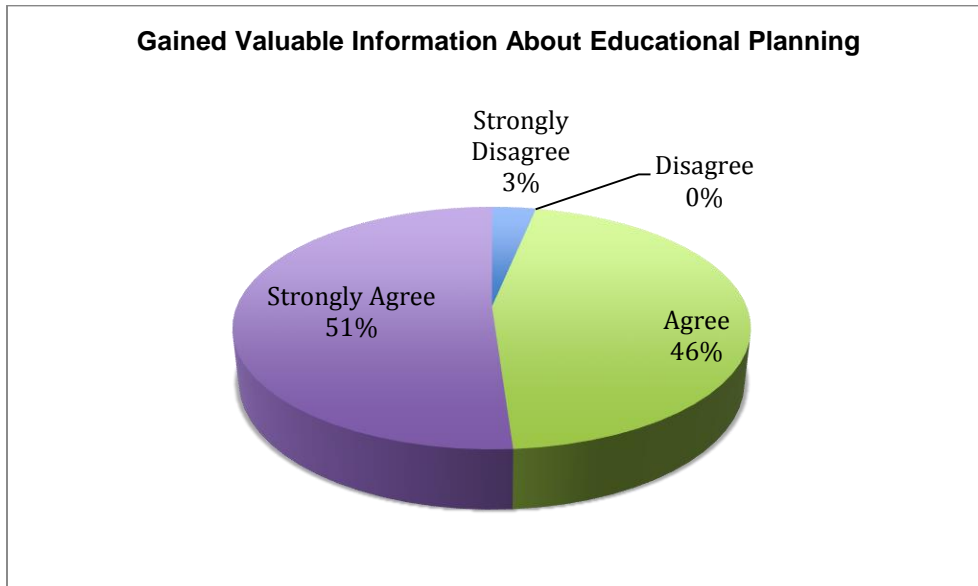
(NCCCS, 2015 & ICC Records Office, 2014 & 2015)

While these were unexpected impacts and not necessarily directly due to the “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” interventions, they do indicate that the improvement plan process and broad-based involvement has created a change in the overall culture at Isothermal in supporting student success.

### **Orientation Survey**

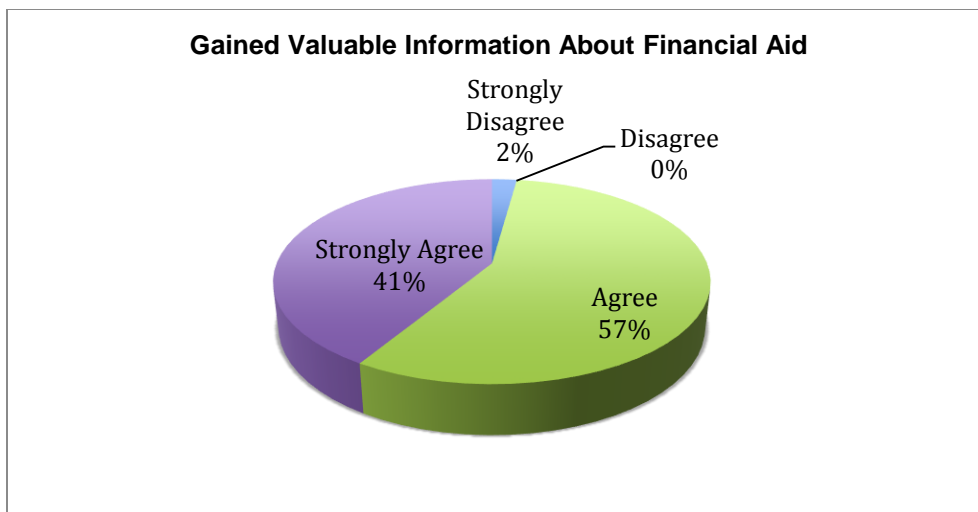
Students were surveyed at the conclusion of the 2014 orientation session to provide feedback regarding content from each module (see figures 12-16). Of the 92 students who completed the survey: 97% agreed or strongly agreed that they gained valuable information about educational planning; 98% agreed or strongly agreed that they gained valuable information about financial aid; 93% agreed or strongly agreed that they gained valuable information about technology resources; 98% agreed or strongly agreed that they gained valuable information about campus and personal safety; 96% agreed or strongly agreed that they gained valuable information about FERPA and educational records.

Figure 12-Pilot Orientation Survey Results: Educational Planning



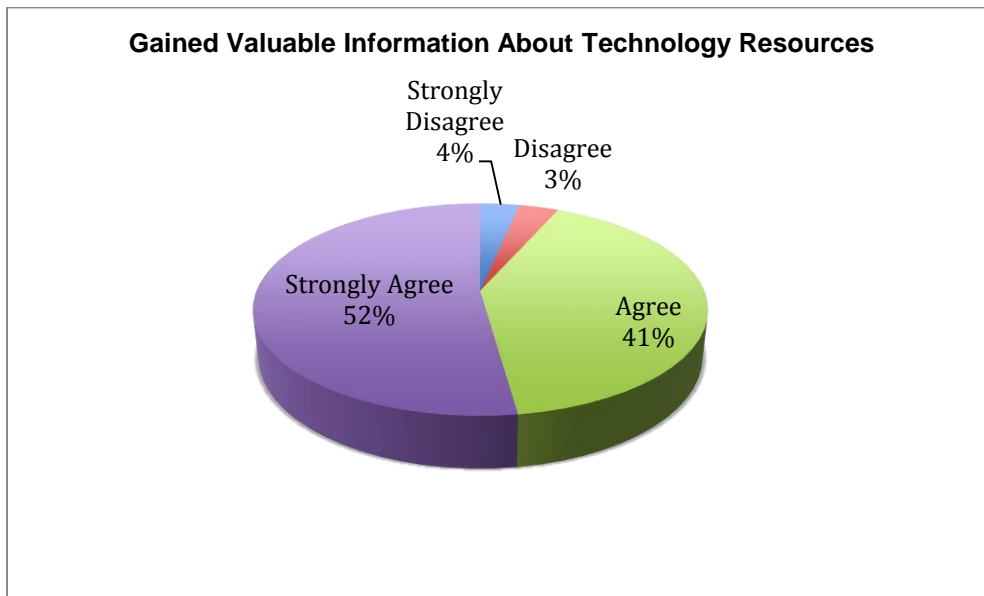
(ICC, 2014)

Figure 13- Pilot Orientation Survey Results: Financial Aid



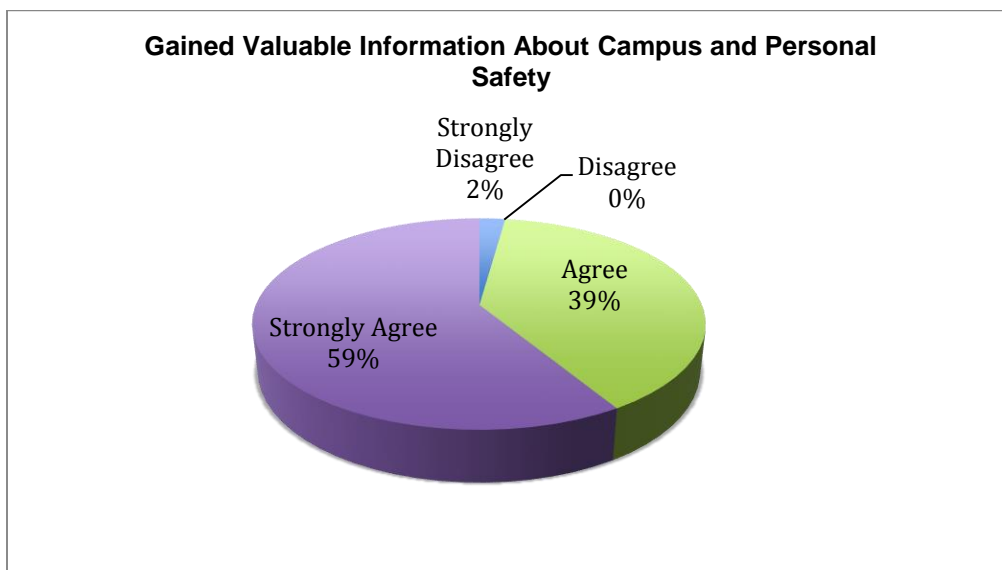
(ICC, 2014)

Figure 14- Pilot Orientation Survey: Technology Resources



(ICC, 2014)

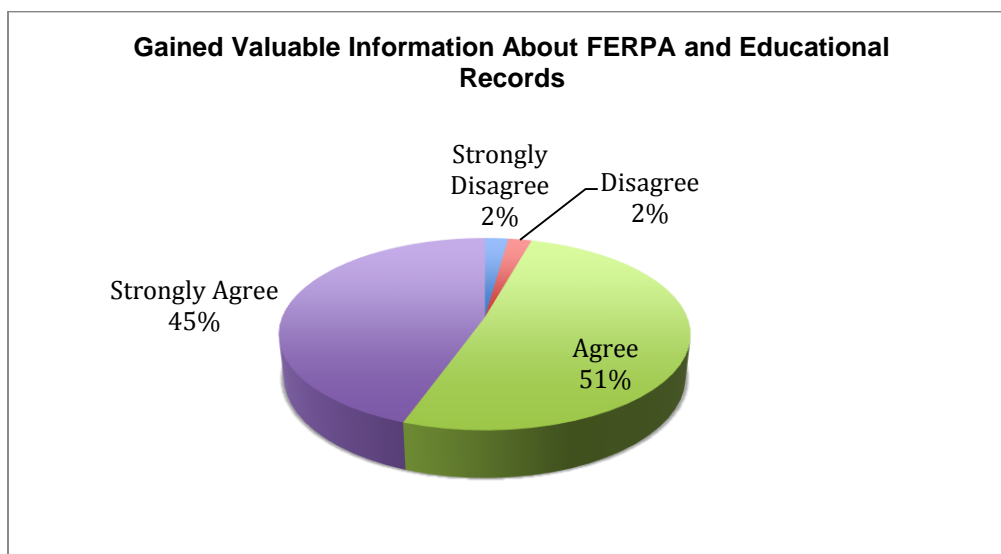
Figure 15- Pilot Orientation Survey: Campus and Personal Safety



(ICC, 2014)



Figure 16- Pilot Orientation Survey: FERPA and Educational Records



(ICC, 2014)

## Discussion and Limitations

Early indications with the data available show promise that “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” will have a positive impact on student progression, retention, and completion. It can be argued that since orientation and student success course completion are not yet mandatory, the students who chose to participate are likely to be more successful students regardless of the interventions. However, the large degree of improvement between groups indicates that improvement should follow when full-scale implementation occurs. One area that was not fully evaluated at this time was the effectiveness of the new success course curriculum. The three pilot ACA sections are critical to assess the MAP assignment and its effectiveness in guiding students through their individualized pathways. Data specific to the MAP assignment were not available at the time. Subsequent evaluation cycles will examine students’ scores on the MAP assignment grading rubric to determine effectiveness of the assignment and students’ understanding of the critical aspects of being successful with their own MAP (see Appendix G).

Interestingly, the comparison of students in the pilot sections of ACA and those enrolled in standard sections did not indicate a great deal of difference in overall performance in GPA, retention, and progression. It appears that enrolling in any section of ACA will lead to increased performance in these three areas. The area of grade distribution between pilot sections and standard sections was the only indication of major differences between the curricula. The pilot sections had a greater percentage of A’s compared to the standard sections, but the most curious area of difference was in the distribution of F’s, No Shows, and Withdrawals. Pilot sections of ACA saw 8.3% of students earning an F while standard sections saw a much higher percentage of F’s at 15.8%. Similarly, pilot sections only awarded 1.6% of their grades as no- shows, meaning the students never attended the class, while standard sections awarded 4.1% of their grades as No Shows. This is likely a strong indicator that the instructors in these pilot curriculums integrated a number of proactive advising techniques within the course such as contacting students in a variety of formats to ensure they attended classes. The pilot sections awarded a higher percentage of withdrawal grades at 8.3% while the standard sections only awarded 2.9%

of their grades as withdrawals. This is another indication that the revised curriculum placed greater emphasis on proactive skills for students and encouraged students to properly withdraw before earning an F for the final course grade.

While it does not appear to make a difference which success course students enroll in, it does make a difference if students couple the success course with orientation attendance. The data indicate a much higher level of student performance if they attend orientation and enroll in a success course than if they only take the success course. As more sections of ACA implement the revised curriculum and instructor training is developed to emphasize proactive advising techniques, the grade distributions will likely continue to indicate students making wiser choices in these courses. There is enough encouraging evidence and future potential with additional interventions not yet implemented to continue the implementation process for the complete “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” improvement plan.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Framed by the key dimensions of Valencia Community College's life mapping model, several key interventions emerged at ICC: implementation of mandatory traditional and online orientation programs, adoption of a proactive advising model, and the requirement of mandatory registration into a success course within the student's first two semesters.

"Start Strong. Finish Stronger." is a means of addressing the three needs that faculty and staff identified during a professional development activity; remove barriers, be job or transfer ready, and enhance success with the use of technology. Mandatory orientation removes barriers and promotes student success by building college knowledge. Proactive advising addresses job or transfer readiness by establishing student goals and making sure that students are in the correct major to fulfill these goals. Once student long-term goals are established, program advisors are enlisted to ensure that the student succeeds in the shortest amount of time and is "job ready". Students will also maintain a relationship with the advisor to encourage student success and to assist in removing barriers to success, promoting engagement and motivation. Mandatory ACA addresses all of the faculty and staff concerns. The course removes barriers through promotion of college knowledge, promotes student success by building relationships with other students and instructors, and enhances job and transfer readiness through several of the lessons that focus on these areas. The emerging themes provided valuable insights and direction toward several interventions that show promise of positively impacting early intervention and student success practices at Isothermal.

Future evaluation cycles should examine not only those students who passed the student success course, but also those who enrolled and did not pass to get a better indication of student performance. Evaluations should also continue to compare students in the pilot sections of the student success course to those in the traditional sections of the course to determine if the new curriculum is making a significant difference in terms of success indicators examined in this evaluation. Once proactive advising processes are established and early intervention forms are

being routinely monitored, another evaluation area will need to be examined to assess if students being referred for early intervention are successful with additional interventions and monitoring.

It will be particularly interesting to monitor how the data are affected when each element of the program becomes mandatory and the entire new student population is participating in the interventions. An updated evaluation of the modified success course sections with regard to student performance on the MAP assignment will be particularly critical in the 2015/2016- assessment cycle as will evaluations of the online version of new student orientation. Every component in the “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” initiative has been designed specifically to meet students where they are and is easily adaptable to meeting their needs. The principles of “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” could be implemented in any educational environment at any level to help students succeed.

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## APPENDIX A

## Stakeholder Analysis

<b>Student Perspective</b>
<b>What is your personal definition of successful college completion?</b>
***Satisfaction of getting a degree and furthering your career
**Getting done
Degree/career prep or university prep
Getting good grades and learning more
Getting what you want out of it; good grades; degree
Obtaining the degree you set out for
Obtaining my degree and moving forward
Being prepared for your field choice
<b>What is your personal definition of a first-time student at Isothermal Community College?</b>
****First time attending ICC
*New learner
Should take Introduction to Computers (CIS-110)
*First time at ICC
*Have a hard time keeping up with work
Fresh meat!
Eager to learn
Transfer from another college
<b>Have you considered quitting (school) or have you quit in the past?</b>
Yes: 7 No: 5
<b>Why: What factors made you quit or consider quitting?</b>
*Time, family situation
*Too much, hard stressful
Afraid to fail
Financial Aid
*Time, need to support the family financially
Moved
<b>What factors helped you stay in school?</b>
*I need to learn more especially how to work computers
*Didn't want to start over
*Want my new career!
Knowing I can't do what I love without going to school
Help family!
Determination
To allow my dad to retire

Make myself marketable for job
Instructor/Advisor push
<b>Describe your experiences during the enrollment process (From application submission to registration in first semester classes)</b>
*Very easy and if I needed any help the staff at ICC was very helpful
Easy, but glad that you can enroll electronic
***Very easy. Had a good advisor helping me
Late registration and didn't work online; was very frustrating by the time fixed; classes (most of them) were full
Was explained and done for me!
Easy with a good advisor
Easy unless you don't have internet
<b>What has been your most positive experience(s) at Isothermal?</b>
*Everyone I've met has been really nice and helpful
**Met some really nice, inspiring people
**Satisfaction of learning new skills
*1st semester getting financial aid
*My instructors
Programming and soldering is fun
Improving my TIG welding technique
National Society of Leadership and Success
Student Government
PTK (honor society)
<b>What suggestions do you have for improving services at Isothermal?</b>
*Have choice on advisor not matter what major
More personalized advising
All the classes seem to make you do the same things; duplicating work
Better food and hangout places; better choices/quality; meal plan option
*Allow more time for student having issues with work in other classes; collaboration between classes about workload; use weekends for long/difficult assignments and projects
Taking Introduction to Computers before taking classes when you use them a lot
A tour to know the buildings, especially during the summer
<b>Which services do you wish you had utilized earlier in your career at Isothermal?</b>
*Degree planning
ACA (needs to be offered more times)
Researching career pathways
*Started earlier in life
More basic Introduction to Computers (CIS-070)
*Credit by exam
ACA scavenger hunt to find places on campus

More sections on schedules
Appointments with advisor and personalized one on one
<b>What things do you wish you had known at the beginning that would have made your transition into college easier?</b>
Don't jump in head first
**Knowing my way around campus; virtual tour
Knowing what books to buy before first day of class
Registration process
Academic plan
Getting here earlier
Signing up for classes earlier
*How Internet courses work
How different it is
Take computer classes before starting
The difference from military college
<b>Staff Perspective</b>
<b>What is your personal definition of successful college completion?</b>
Completing a credential
Completing a class, certificate, diploma or degree.
A degree
Attaining the desired college credential.
Successfully meeting the desires/need of the student
Successful college completion is passing a college course for some and completing a college degree for others. It depends on the student's goal.
Completing all the courses with passing grades to earn a degree, diploma, or certificate.
My personal definition of successful college completion is that the student has completed or exceeded their goal(s).
Student completes a certificate, diploma, or degree
To receive a degree, diploma, or certificate
Successful college completion is graduating with a certificate, diploma, or degree.
The student achieving their goals during the time period they set.
<b>What is your personal definition of a first-time student at Isothermal Community College?</b>
Recent high school graduate, or even older adult, that has never attended a community college or university anywhere AS A COLLEGE STUDENT (students who took CCP classes during high school are still first time college students when they begin their freshman year)
Taking a class for the first time in a certificate, diploma or degree (not a CCP student or special credit.
Never taken any classes at all including high school
A student who has no attempted college credit hours following high school completion.
First semester enrolled in curriculum at Isothermal
Student who has never attended Isothermal or has been out of college for the last 5 years.
one who has never taken any curriculum courses here

anyone of any age interested in taking a class for any reason
A student who has never attended ICC in the past.
Student who has never been to this college or any college
A first-time student is a person who has never attended Isothermal in a curriculum program.
First time student is the first time they take a curriculum course.
<b>What do you believe to be the greatest barriers to students completing their programs at Isothermal?</b>
Lack of student motivation; Lack of communication between students and ICC regarding credential requirement (applying to graduate, transfer credit policy, attendance policies, etc.); Lack of clear goals (students who switch majors dozens of times); Financial Aid restrictions (this is closely tied to the above reasons - students run out of money because they've not attended or switched majors without completing a credential)
family and personal reasons & job conflicts
Schedule conflicts; Instructors not responding to students and therefore students becoming frustrated and leaving
Lack of communication between offices; Inclusion of developmental courses in curriculum programs (i.e. outside of continuing education).
Cost/missing financial aid deadlines, cost of supplies and/or textbooks (and lack of less expensive access-code only options), scheduling around personal time frames, child/family care, transportation, course schedule times and availability, level of documents/steps required, testing (esp. with new length), sink-or-swim mentality; not sure if student registration will affect or not yet
Students' individual issues and circumstances, such as lack of motivation to complete a degree (but motivated to get Pell money), transportation issues, family issues, health problems, etc.
The greatest barriers are personal ones, such as having small children, trying to work while going to school, or taking care of a sick relative. Some students want to learn, but have a hard time understanding what is being taught.
I believe the greatest barriers to students completing their programs at ICC are fear and personal or financial barriers.
Life circumstances. I believe we serve a very none traditional group of students. These students start college with every intention of completing, but then "life" gets in the way. They run into job conflicts or family issues and simply get side tracked from their original goal.
Family life and not wanting to come to college just here for the money.
The greatest barrier to completion of college programs is because students are not prepared for college level work. A majority are placed in remedial courses which lower morale and uses up financial aid funds.
Goal Setting. The students need to understand their own goals. If they do not know their goal they don't know when they have finished it. Sounds simple, but if the student doesn't define their goals and go back to check their progress they will wonder around never completing anything. If they don't know their goals they can't figure out the path to follow and end up wasting time, money, and energy.
<b>What does Isothermal do well in equipping students to overcome barriers to completion?</b>
The forefront of student completion, to me, is the student advisor. The personal contact each advisor has is priceless in keeping students informed of policies and keeping them motivated and on track to completion. I think some of ICC's advisors are great, and I think some aren't. The advising center is improving in their efforts. Most ICC employees go very far (maybe too far?) for the students, while others don't do much of anything. So, essentially, I think the problems ICC has can be narrowed down to a handful of employees, while most employees do a great job.

Offer as much financial help that we can. Large range of types of instruction (WB, HY, and online). Several on campus computer labs. Required advising. Recent change in transfer credits to 75% max.
Nothing
Provides an Advising Center and Learning Support & Retention Office; Gives individual attention to students who need extra assistance; Keeps class sizes small to improve communication between instructors & students.
individual offices keep websites up to date, addition of orientation and open house, available support services/Advising Center for questions
Faculty and staff care about students and try to develop relationships to keep students engaged and persisting toward their goals. Referrals for Early Intervention may help.
Advisors work with student on their schedules so that they can take classes at times that are most convenient for them. Online classes are offered for the convenience of taking classes at home on their own schedule.
Isothermal equips students through a friendly & supportive atmosphere, developmental classes, and learning support.
I'm not real sure. I honestly believe we create barriers instead of eliminating them.
Financial aid
Isothermal offers help to students through the Learning Support and Retention Office as well as learning labs and tutoring opportunities to improve skills and promote a learning environment.
I have seen in the advising center some advisers taking the time to help first time students plan their goals and make action plans. They look at the next four semesters to determine how many credits per semester are needed. This action illustrates for the student the need to stay in class and do well.
<b>Describe one or two things that you would like to see Isothermal add or change that you believe would better equip students to overcome barriers to student completion.</b>
Mandatory orientation for EVERYONE (possibly excluding Lateral Entry, but preferably not); ACA classes taken in the first semester always.
Improved class scheduling (within departments and with other departments) for students. All students are advised in the advising center. Book cost continues to be a concern of students.
more class offerings
Move developmental courses to continuing education and provide another source of funding to assist students who cannot afford them; Improve the flow of information to keep all staff informed of important changes or needed information. This could include a staff e-newsletter or some other means of mass distribution.
Clear information many places on support services like tutoring; online options for support to match number of online sections; web site consistency/accuracy; community notice on deadlines for financial aid and times for registration
If we had unlimited resources, it would be nice to help with transportation or offer more part time work opportunities, like Work Study Positions, so that students can earn some money to help with everyday expenses while in school.
Advisors or counselors that students can voice their concerns to and maybe find a way to stay in school in spite of their problems.
More help for students who have a hard time understanding what they are being taught.
In addition to a career counselor who we already have, more admissions personnel, a staff member dedicated to following up on new students, and a life coach on staff.
I believe students need comprehensive counseling that will help them truly make educated decisions about their future the will help them establish realistic goals. They then need to be equipped with the knowledge they need to establish a map of how they are going to reach their goal and how to evaluate where they are on the map. Do our students really know exactly what it is going to take to get from enrolling to graduating?



Advisors at all times to be available to students.

I would like to see Isothermal offer more programs in which students could obtain jobs in up and coming fields (medical, geriatric care, hospitality, etc.).

I would like to see time spent with students helping them to understand the need to decide on a course of action and show them how to keep up with their progress even before they begin the ACA studies.

## APPENDIX B

**Orientation Module - Scripts****Welcome and Introduction of College Life and Culture**

1. President Welcome Video
2. Pictures of Student Engagement Opportunities
  - a. Clubs and Leadership Opportunities
  - b. Statistic
  - c. Mentor Program
  - d. Grub and Sports Day
  - e. Intramurals

There are plenty of ways in which you can get involved on campus. You may take advantage of the many club and leadership groups offered. You may engage with other students by starting your own study groups. Studies show that students who are actively engaged on campus, whether it be through club membership or peer groups, are more likely to complete their program of study. You will have opportunities to have fun with your peers and faculty of Isothermal through Grub Day and Sports Day events, intramurals, and other SGA sponsored programs. Speaking of SGA, why don't you join them at a future meeting and help plan the next campus-wide event?

3. Interactive Campus Map for Virtual Campus Tour
  - a. Significant Campus Features
    - i. Lake
    - ii. Amphitheatre
    - iii. Disc Golf
  - b. Buildings
    - i. Subjects Taught
    - ii. Services Available

## **Need to Know: Campus Safety and Consumer Information**

The Need to Know Module will discuss some Student Policies as well and procedures that will help you be successful and safe at Isothermal.

Just inside your Student Handbook you will find our Academic Calendar. You will want to look over this calendar and make notes of important dates. We encourage students to personalize this calendar by adding information that will help you manage your time, such as project deadlines and test dates. There is also a list of “Important Dates” for each term on the Records Office webpage.

The next section discusses Academic Policies & Procedures, such as Academic Alert (students whose GPA falls below 2.0). Ongoing communication between students, faculty, and advisors throughout the semester is very important. A Support Team member may contact you to assist you with strategies to help you pull up your GPA. We hope students will take advantage of both academic and non-academic services offered here at Isothermal, such as our Writing lab, free tutoring, and career counseling.

Regular class attendance is essential to successful college completion. Students should make every effort to attend both seated and online courses. Instructors may withdraw students who have been absent in excess of 20% of the course. This is not mandatory and instructors establish their own attendance policies. It is imperative that students read and understand course syllabi and communicate with instructors regarding absences. It is extremely important for you to attend class by the census date. The census date for a four week, DMA class is the first day of the course. For online classes, students must submit a designated assignment before the census date to be allowed to continue the course. Students are removed from courses where they do not attend or complete a census assignment in time that can affect their financial aid.

Students wishing to withdraw from classes must do so in writing. Drop forms are available on the Records Office webpage, as well as in Student Services and Departments across campus. Students should consult with their instructor and with Financial Aid prior to withdrawing from classes.

Final grade reports and unofficial transcripts are available on Patriot Port (Isothermal does not require midterm grades).

Isothermal’s safety information can be found in the Emergency Information section of the Student Handbook and on the Campus Safety webpage. Take time to review the Safety Video to familiar yourself with the emergency procedures of the College. You’ll be relieved to know that Isothermal is a safe place to attend college as shown by the published Crime statistics located on our Campus Safety webpage and referred to within the Student Handbook. Although acts of sexual violence rarely occur, it is important to know who to contact if sexual harassment or violence does take place. Please report any concerns or complaints regarding sexual harassment or violence to one of the designated coordinators.

One last thing to go over with you is your Student Rights, Responsibilities, and Judicial Procedures. You can find the policy in Appendix A of the Student Handbook. Know the Code, that is the “Student Code of Conduct” to understand expectations of behavior on campus and the consequences of violating the code.

## FERPA: Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act 1974

- **What is FERPA?**  
Is a Federal law that protects the privacy of student education records and must provide an eligible student with an opportunity to inspect, request change, control over release, to file complaint with the Department of Education.
- **Why do we care?**  
It's the law; failure to obey-could cost us Federal Funds including student financial aid that is why it is so important to us. More than 80% of our students receive Financial Aid
- **Whose privacy and whose rights?**  
FERPA gives parents certain rights with respect to their children's K-12 education records. These rights are transferred to the student when he or she reaches the age of 18 or attends a school beyond the high school level.
- **Who and when are rights and privacy covered by FERPA?**  
Anyone enrolled in classes at Isothermal. Remember at age 18 or begins attending an institution of higher education regardless of age and where the class is located
- **How do you find out information about FERPA and how do we notify you about FERPA?** Handbook (printed and website) and in programs such as these How often? Yearly
- **Who is responsible?**  
All members of the college (faculty and staff) who have access to records
- **Do you the student have any responsibilities for your rights and privacy?**  
Yes- of protecting your own and others personal identifiable information (i.e., phone numbers, address, user ids, passwords and ID numbers), and your rights-know the college policies located in the student handbook (*Appendix B pp.113-118*)
- **Who has access to records?**  
School officials– only those who “need to know” (not maintenance, etc.)
- **What is a student record?**  
Anything maintained by the college in any form (handwritten, printed, typed, film, electronic microfiche, etc.
- **What can be released without written permission?**  
Directory information – Department of Education gives the college latitude in choosing more items than we have opted to share
- **What is directory info?**
  - Student's name
  - Major fields/programs of study
  - Participation in officially recognized activities and sports
  - Dates of attendance (Terms not actual attendance in class)
  - Degrees, honors and awards received (i.e. graduation, Dean's List)
  - College email address (for use in Moodle IN/HY/WB classes)
  - Photograph (for campus publication purposes – SGA events, graduation)
- **Just because someone pays your tuition, does not open the door for knowing your:**

Schedule, grades, daily attendance, and personal information like id numbers, address or phone numbers-you would still have to sign a release. (Parents, your student can access most information via Patriot Port)

- **Do we release non-directory info to anyone without written permission?**  
The law requires that we release to military recruiters: Solomon Amendment requires that we provide timely warnings of crimes that represent a threat to the safety of our students or employees: Clery Act, court ordered subpoena (we are required to make reasonable effort to notify you but even if we don't get in touch with you we must still release), a request from accreditation agency or organizations conducting certain studies for or on behalf of the college
- **What is required by law on a release form?**  
Your signature, the date of the request, what you want released, why you want it released and to whom you want it released to.
- **Is an email request okay?**  
Not just an email; you may attach a scanned document with a signature.
- **When picking up an official transcript?**  
We require a picture id. If you have given us written permission for someone else to pick up, we will also require that they provide their picture id.

## **Technology: How It's Useful**

Patriot Port, student email, and Moodle are the gateways to your online access to Isothermal Community College.

### **Patriot Port**

Patriot Port provides you information to help you with your Master Academic Plan (MAP). The MAP tells you what your major is and which courses you need to complete to graduate. When you began at Isothermal Community College, you may have had to take the placement test. The results of this test or waivers from the test can be found in Patriot Port under "Test Summary." These test results may impact which courses you may need take before beginning some of the required courses for your program.

Patriot Port also has information about you as a student at Isothermal Community College, such as your student ID number, your major, and your advisor contact information. It also gives you the latest information about any Student Services related items to be addressed, such as your financial aid award letter or need to update your admissions record under "My Communications."

Patriot Port is also where you go to search for courses and sections before you meet with your advisor to set your schedule for the upcoming semester. You will find a brief description of the course, the teacher, and the information about the book (such as title and cost). Once you register for courses you can find your schedule in Patriot Port. The schedule will give you information such as course start dates, teacher, the building and room number where the class will meet, and the days and time for each class meeting.

Once you complete the course, your final grade is posted in Patriot Port. Once the final grade is in Patriot Port, your GPA is updated as well as your progress on your Program Evaluation. You the Program Evaluation function to monitor your progress towards graduation along with your MAP or to see how many classes count towards a different major. Unofficial transcripts are available to view on Patriot Port as well.

### **Student Email**

All students are issued an Isothermal Community College student email. You must use your student email to communicate with employees of the College. In some courses, you will be required to use your student email to submit assignments to be graded. You should not use your personal email account, because it may be blocked by the College network, especially if it is a free email, like Gmail. To make sure your emails get to the right person, use the college-provided student email.

In addition to using your student email for assignments and course work, you will also receive important emails from employees of the College. Your student email receives notifications for college closings due to inclement weather. The Admissions Office and the Financial Aid Office will use your student email to send critically important information about your enrollment status and financial aid. You will receive emails about college life, such as social events like Sports Day and Grub Day, intramural sports tournaments, and other cultural events that occur on campus.

### **Moodle**

Moodle is the online learning management system that contains the content for your courses. Teachers use Moodle to hold course content such as you syllabus, homework assignments, handouts, and tests. Moodle can also be used to show you your assignment grades and provide comments and feedback on work you turned in for grading.

Teachers have a lot of flexibility in using Moodle, so you will see it used in many different ways while taking courses at Isothermal Community College. If your course is 100% online (Internet-based) or partially online (Web-assisted or Hybrid), you will see this course in Moodle. If your course is 100% face-to-face (Traditional), a teacher may also choose to use Moodle in the course.

### **Summary**

So to recap, Patriot Port will provide you the latest information about your progress on your Master Academic Plan (MAP). You must use your student email to communicate with employees of the College. Moodle is the online learning management system that contains the content for your course. All three of the above require you to login with a secure, personalized login and password. You can find help to login online at the Isothermal Community College website by clicking on Campus Services, then select Help Desk. You may send an email to request help with Patriot Port, student email, or Moodle.

## Financial Aid: How to Keep It

Have you applied for Financial Aid? If not, you should do so by completing a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) online at [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov). In order for the Financial Aid Office to receive your eligibility results, you will need to list Isothermal's School Code (002934) on your application. You should always complete the FAFSA whether you think you will qualify for federal financial aid or not. Isothermal has many scholarship opportunities for students, one of which is the Powers Service Scholarship. If you are from Rutherford or Polk County and you don't qualify for federal or state aid, you may qualify for the Powers Service Scholarship. For more information on this scholarship, as well as others, please visit the financial aid website or visit the Financial Aid Office for assistance.

Be careful when applying for financial aid. Please remember, you should never pay for assistance when applying for financial aid of any type. The Financial Aid staff at Isothermal provides this service at no cost. Apply at [www.fafsa.gov](http://www.fafsa.gov).

Students are eligible to receive a Pell Grant for 12 semesters (6 years) of full-time funding, the equivalent of 600%. This is called Pell Lifetime Eligibility. All students receiving Pell Grant funds are subject to this limitation. Keep this in mind if you're planning to transfer to a four-year institution. Once your lifetime eligibility is reached, you are no longer eligible for Pell Grant funds. Therefore, make sure you make the most of your time at Isothermal, so that you don't waste this opportunity.

The financial aid award period is for an academic year beginning in the Fall and ending the following summer. Remember, you must submit a new FAFSA each academic year. A good rule of thumb is to remember to submit another FAFSA each time taxes are due. It is recommended to wait about two weeks after filing taxes to enable your FAFSA to link properly with the IRS website. Remember, the financial aid staff are available to assist you with the FAFSA and linking process. Full-time is considered 12 credit hours in a degree program and 29 contact hours are required to be considered full-time in diploma or certificate programs. You may need to take more than just 12 credit hours to complete your program in a timely manner. You may still receive financial aid if you're part-time; however, you will need to consult your award letter on Patriot Port for more details. Remember that Financial Aid only pays for courses that are required for your major. Your Master Academic Plan or MAP, Program Evaluation on Patriot Port, and the College catalog can make sure your own track. Your advisor is an excellent resource, too. If you receive financial aid and want to take a course that is not required for your major, you may pay for the class out of your own pocket with no penalty.

Once you have been awarded financial aid, you have to work to keep it. At the end of each semester, you must be making satisfactory academic progress (SAP). What does this mean? You must meet the following standards: (1) complete at least 67% of the cumulative credit hours ever attempted on campus; (2) maintain a cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA) of at least a 2.0; and (3) be within the maximum timeframe (150% of the published length of your program of study). In other words, to stay in good standing with financial aid, you will need to satisfactorily complete the courses for which you've enrolled. Don't make a habit of dropping or failing courses, and before you make any big decision regarding withdrawing from a course, make sure that you consult not only your advisor, but also someone in financial aid. Be aware that a Support Team member may contact you to help you strategize ways to be successful and revise your Master Academic Plan or MAP if you do encounter difficulty. Please contact the Financial Aid Office at 828-395-4198 if you need to withdraw from any, or all courses or change your major, as this could affect your financial aid eligibility.

If you have extenuating circumstances that prohibit you from meeting the Satisfactory Academic Progress standards and you are placed on financial aid suspension, you may submit an application for appeal. The application is available in the Student Services Office. A submitted appeal does not guarantee an approved appeal.



## Comprehensive Educational Planning

Comprehensive Educational Planning is your gateway to completion at Isothermal Community College through the development of a Master Academic Plan. This plan helps you Start Strong. Finish Stronger.

**You will hear the term Master Academic Plan or MAP referred to a lot on campus. You will be introduced to the MAP concept here in Orientation, but will have a detailed assignment related to your MAP in your Academic Student Success Class (ACA 115 or 122 depending on your major). A MAP is just what it sounds like it is: a path for you to follow to get to your goal.**

Your MAP empowers you to be successful by:

1. Setting attainable short and long term goals. Why are you attending Isothermal Community College? Are you here for a certificate, diploma or degree? These answers will be discovered through talks with your advisor as well as through your ACA course. You are required to take ACA within your first two semesters at ICC, so that you can get started on your MAP quickly.  
Your MAP empowers you to be successful by:
2. Providing you with an individualized course sequence designed to provide you with a clear path to degree completion. Your plan will be a personalized version of the program outlines found in the back of the College Catalog. You will identify what courses will be necessary for you to reach your goals and create a semester-by-semester MAP of when those courses should be taken. This MAP should be used in conjunction with your program evaluation on Patriot Port.

Keep in mind that you are not in this alone. Once you are enrolled at Isothermal, you will be assigned an academic advisor. This advisor will help you understand your MAP and help make any changes necessary along the way. He or she will help you with registering for classes and assist if you experience any roadblocks or detours. Specifically, your advisor is a program-specific expert who can help you with knowing deadlines, the consequences of withdrawing, as well as understanding Isothermal's expectations of you the student, there are resources available if you find yourself struggling. Isothermal offers FREE support resources for you that include tutoring, mentoring, personal counseling assistance and referrals, disability services and career counseling. See the Stay Connected Flyer for a complete list.

For students who may be struggling in class for a variety of reasons, Isothermal faculty participate in an Early Intervention Program. This allows a faculty member to refer a student to a Support Team. Students referred will be contacted by one of the caring people from the team who will assist in getting them connected to the right services, enabling the student to Finish Strong.

Comprehensive Educational planning refers to the resources necessary for you to Start Strong and Finish Stronger. As part of educational planning, you are becoming familiar with campus resources and culture through orientation and will be creating a Master Academic Plan (MAP) in your ACA course. Your MAP will include goal setting, creating an individualized course sequence, and getting connected to campus resources through early intervention if you find yourself struggling or off track. All of these components are designed to assist you to Start Strong so that you can Finish Stronger.

## APPENDIX C



## ACA Exemption Form

Student: \_\_\_\_\_

ID#: \_\_\_\_\_

Major: \_\_\_\_\_

Circle one: ACA 115    ACA 122    is not a graduation requirement for the above student.

The reason for the exemption is:

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. Has an Associate's or Bachelor's Degree (*official transcript must be received by Registrar to verify degree*)

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. Transferred a minimum of 12 credit hours from another college

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. Changed major (A10100/A10400) and missed ACA-122 as an introductory course but took ACA-115

Signature of Departmental Dean or Registrar:

\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

**M.A.P. (Master Academic Plan) Assignment**

## Part 1: Goals

Before you begin your academic journey, it is important to understand your goals for this journey.

**DIRECTIONS: Answer the questions regarding your goals and expectations**

1. What degree, diploma, and/or certificate are you seeking?
2. Do you plan to transfer to a 4-year university?
3. If you are planning to transfer to a 4-year university, what major will you pursue?
4. What are your career goals?
5. Is the degree, diploma, or certificate suitable for your career goals? Explain your answer.
6. How long do you expect to be enrolled in school to achieve your goals?

## Part 2: Understanding the program course checklist

Each degree/diploma/certificate offered through Isothermal Community College has a program course checklist. These checklists provide students with a list of courses that must be taken to earn a degree, diploma, and/or certificate. It is important for students to be aware of these courses, when they are offered, how many credits each course carries, and if a prerequisite exists for certain course. Some program course checklists are simple and straightforward. Other program course checklists are more flexible allowing students to make choices concerning which courses they would like to take.

**DIRECTIONS: For this section, you must locate your program course checklist. These checklists can be found by clicking on the “Academic Programs” tab on the Isothermal Community College main web page. Once you land on the “Academics” page you will need to choose the division that your program falls under to locate the specific program course checklist. Review this program course checklist and decide which courses you will take to complete your degree, diploma, or certificate. As stated above, this process may be simple or slightly more complex depending upon pathway. Save & upload this document into Moodle.**

## Part 3: How long will it take?

Many students are often misled into thinking that a degree from Isothermal Community College will only take two years to complete. Though this option is possible, it is not always realistic for every student. It is important that you understand how long it will take for you to complete your goals.

**DIRECTIONS: Using the program course checklist complete the “How long will it take?” chart. If you have already taken courses, fill those courses in based on when you took them. Be sure to include any DMA or DRE classes that you have taken or that you will need to take. For each semester, record a credit-hour load that you feel is realistic. The purpose of this assignment is to get an idea of when you think you might complete your educational goals.**

## Part 4: Assessment #1 of your M.A.P.

**DIRECTIONS: Complete the assessment assignment after the courses have been mapped out over the semesters.**

Which program are you pursuing?	<p>Arts &amp; Sciences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Associate of Arts</li> <li>• Associate of Science</li> </ul> <p>Business Sciences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business Administration</li> <li>• Business Administration: Banking &amp; Finance</li> <li>• Business Administration: Marketing &amp; Retailing</li> <li>• Computer Information Technology</li> <li>• Computer Programming</li> <li>• Entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Healthcare Business Informatics</li> <li>• Healthcare Management Technology</li> <li>• Medical Office Administration</li> <li>• Networking Technology</li> <li>• Office Administration</li> <li>• Paralegal Technology</li> <li>• Web Technologies</li> </ul> <p>Applied Sciences and Engineering Technology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advertising &amp; Graphic Design</li> <li>• Broadcasting &amp; Production Technology</li> <li>• Building Construction Technology</li> <li>• Collision Repair &amp; Refinishing Technology</li> <li>• Computer Engineering Technology</li> <li>• Computer Integrated Machining</li> <li>• Electrical Systems Technology</li> <li>• Electronics Engineering Technology</li> <li>• Industrial Systems Technology</li> <li>• Manufacturing Technology</li> <li>• Mechanical Drafting technology</li> <li>• Mechanical Engineering Technology</li> <li>• Sustainability Technologies</li> <li>• Welding Technology</li> </ul> <p>Health and Public Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AD Nursing</li> <li>• AP AD Nursing</li> <li>• Surgical Technology</li> <li>• Practical Nursing</li> <li>• LPN Refresher</li> <li>• Basic Law Enforcement Training</li> <li>• Cosmetology</li> <li>• Criminal Justice</li> <li>• Early Childhood Education</li> <li>• EMS</li> <li>• General Occupational Technology</li> <li>• Occupational Education Associate</li> <li>• School-Age Education</li> </ul>
Which level of education are you seeking?	a. Degree

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>b. Diploma</li> <li>c. Certificate</li> </ul>
Approximately how many credit hours must be earned to complete your program?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. 10-19 credit hours</li> <li>b. 20-29 credit hours</li> <li>c. 30-39 credit hours</li> <li>d. 40-49 credit hours</li> <li>e. 50-59 credit hours</li> <li>f. 60-69 credit hours</li> <li>g. 70-79 credit hours</li> </ul>
After mapping out the required classes, how many semesters will it take to complete your program?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. 1-2 semesters</li> <li>b. 3-4 semesters</li> <li>c. 5-6 semesters</li> <li>d. 7-8 semesters</li> <li>e. 9 or more semesters</li> </ul>
After mapping out your required classes, were the total amount of semesters needed to complete the program more than you expected?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Yes</li> <li>b. No</li> </ul>
If the answer to the previous question was yes, what do you think was the reason for the extended amount of time needed to complete the program? <b>Mark all that apply. If the answer was no, mark N/A</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. The need to take DMA and DRE classes to prepare for college level course work</li> <li>b. Taking 12 hours or less each semester</li> <li>c. Conflicts with job schedule</li> <li>d. Conflicts with personal schedule: family issues, transportation, etc.</li> <li>e. Difficulty with time management</li> <li>f. Difficulty with technology: online classes, checking email, etc.</li> <li>g. Classes were not offered when I needed them</li> <li>h. Other</li> <li>i. N/A</li> </ul>
Do you feel the M.A.P. (Master Academic Plan) has helped you gain an understanding of what is required of you to complete your program?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Yes</li> <li>b. No</li> </ul>
Do you feel the M.A.P. (Master Academic Plan) will help you maintain your focus and stay on track during your time with Isothermal Community College?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Yes</li> <li>b. No</li> </ul>

Part 5: Assessment #2 of your M.A.P.

**DIRECTIONS: Complete the assessment assignment during the last half of the semester.**

Do you feel that you have stayed on track with your M.A.P.?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Yes</li> <li>b. No</li> </ul>
If the answer is no to the previous question, what steps have you taken to get back on track? What is your new action plan?	Comment:

Have you been contacted by any of the following with regards to your progress in class and with your M.A.P.?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Instructor</li><li>b. Advisor</li><li>c. Representative from Learning Support &amp; Retention</li><li>d. Other</li><li>e. N/A</li></ul>

## APPENDIX E

## Example Program Outline

**Advisor Information:**  
Electronic Engineering Technology,  
Applied Sciences & Engineering



Academic Development (if Applicable)			
	DMA 010		DMA 050
DRE 096		DMA 020	DMA 060
DRE 097		DMA 030	DMA 070
DRE 098		DMA 040	DMA 080

\_\_\_\_\_  
Last Name                      First Name                      Name Called                      Student ID#

**Computer Engineering Technology (A40160)**

Total Required Hours 74-76

Registered	1st Fall	Course Name	Credit Hours	Contact Hours	Prerequisites	Semester Offered	Pathway
	ACA 115*	Success & Study Skills	1	2		FA, SP, SU	A,D
	CET 111	Computer Upgrade and Repair	3	5		FA	A,D,C
	EGR 110	Intro to Engineering Technology	2	3		FA	A,D,C
	ELC 138	DC Circuit Analysis	4	6		FA	A,D,C
	ELN 133	Digital Electronics	4	6		FA	A,D,C
	MAT 121**	Algebra/Trigonometry I	3	4	Satisfactory placement or DMA 10,20,30,40,50,60	FA,SP	A,D

17

Registered	1st Spring	Course Name	Credit Hours	Contact Hours	Prerequisites	Semester Offered	Pathway
	CIS 110	Introduction to Computers	3	3		FA, SP, SU	A
	ELC 139	AC Circuit Analysis	4	6		SP	A,D,C
	ELN 131	Analog Electronics I	4	6	ELC 112 or ELC 138	SP	A,D,C
	ELN 232	Introduction to Microprocessors	4	6		SP	A,D,C
	MAT 122***	Algebra/Trigonometry II	3	5	MAT 121	SP	A

18

Registered	1st Summer	Course Name	Credit Hours	Contact Hours	Prerequisites	Semester Offered	Pathway
	CET 161	Procedural Programming	3	8		SU	A,C
	ELN 152	Fabrication Techniques	2	5		SU	A,C
	ELN 233	Microprocessor Systems	4	6	ELN 232	SU	A

5.00

Registered	2nd Fall	Course Name	Credit Hours	Contact Hours	Prerequisites	Semester Offered	Pathway
	ART 211	Robot Programming	3	5		FA	A,C
	ELC 128	Introduction to PLCs	3	5		FA	A,C
	ENG 111	Writing and Inquiry	3	3	Satisfactory placement or DRE 096, 097, & 098	FA, SP, SU	A,D
	PHY 131	Physics of Mechanics	4	5	MAT 121 or MAT 171	FA, SP	A
	HUM Elective	Humanities Elective	3	3		FA, SP, SU	A

16

Registered	2nd Spring	Course Name	Credit Hours	Contact Hours	Prerequisites	Semester Offered	Pathway
	EGR 285	Design Project	2	4		SP	A
	ELC 127	Software for Technicians	2	4	ELC 111, 112, or ELC 138	SP	A,C
	ENG 112	Writing and Research in the Discipline	3	3	ENG 111	FA, SP, SU	A
	PHY 132	Physics of Electricity & Mag	4	5	PHY 131	SP	A
	SOC Elective	Social Science Elective	3	3	TBD	FA, SP, SU	A

14

\*ACA 122 may be substituted for ACA 115

\*\*MAT 171 may be substituted for MAT 121 but requires add'l DMA 070-080 prerequisite

\*\*\*MAT 172 may be substituted for MAT 122 but requires MAT 171 prerequisite

\*MAT 121 &amp; 122 do NOT lead to Calculus. Students planning to pursue a bachelor's degree in engineering should take MAT 171 &amp; 172 instead.

## APPENDIX F

## Marketing Plan

Marketing Timeline				
Promotional Activity	Responsibility Group	Target Audience	Details	Date
"Patriot Run" 5K Run	Marketing Committee, various faculty/staff	Community, Students, Faculty & Staff	<b>Preparation:</b> The inaugural 5k was held to observe the College's 50 <sup>th</sup> anniversary. It also introduced the community, the faculty, and the students to the College's "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." Initiative.	September 27, 2014
Logo Contest	Marketing Committee	Students	<b>Preparation:</b> All currently enrolled curriculum students at Isothermal were invited to compete in the "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." logo contest. The winner won a brand new Apple iPad Mini.	November/December 2014
Professional Development Day	Marketing Committee	Faculty & Staff	<b>Awareness:</b> Faculty and Staff were officially introduced to the "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." slogan. The kick-off included a balloon drop as well as the unveiling of the plan's	February 5, 2015



Marketing Timeline				
			logo created by graphic design student.	
Educational Planning Video	Marketing Committee	Students	<b><u>Awareness:</u></b> Students in broadcasting class created a video to educate students about the importance of an Educational Plan. It was uploaded to the College website before registration for summer and fall semesters began.	March 2015-Ongoing
Printing marketing materials (Banners, magnets, bumper stickers, etc.)	Marketing Committee	Students	<b><u>Awareness:</u></b> Banners for student, faculty, and staff awareness of the topic and improvements initiated. Banners are posted at the three campuses: Spindale, Polk, and RLC. Other promotional items were printed for *Sports Day.	April 14, 2015 - Ongoing
"Start Strong. Finish Stronger." theme for Sports Day	Marketing Committee Student Government Association (SGA) Various faculty/staff	Students, Faculty & Staff	<b><u>Awareness:</u></b> Sports Day occurs every spring. Classes are cancelled. Students, Faculty and Staff participate in	April 14, 2015

Marketing Timeline				
			games and activities. This year the theme was dedicated to "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." with a racing theme, including a derby and a run. "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." T-shirts were awarded to students as prizes in various contests.	
Career Focus Publication	Marketing Committee/Marketing Director	Community (24,000 households)	<b>Awareness:</b> Publication mailed to Rutherford and Polk County households including a high profile article about the "Start Strong. Finish Stronger" initiative.	May 2015
2015-2016 Catalog & 2015-2016 Student Handbook	Handbook Committee & Catalog Committee	Students, Potential Students, Faculty & Staff	<b>Awareness:</b> "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." Logo incorporated on the covers.	Summer 2015
SSFS posters strategically placed across campus	Marketing Committee	Students, Faculty & Staff	<b>Awareness:</b> Posters/signs placed across campus beginning in the fall; The Committee will change them periodically in an effort to keep interest; locations	Summer 2015 – ongoing

Marketing Timeline				
			include stairwell doors, elevators, bathroom stall doors, Student Center, computer labs	
Quips	Marketing Committee	Students, Faculty & Staff	<b>Awareness:</b> Short, emails sent once a week, explaining a different element of the plan.	September – October 2015
Convocation	Full Team	Faculty & Staff	<b>Awareness:</b> Miscellaneous items given to faculty and staff; fun quiz activity serves as pre-test for employees	August 17, 2015
New Student Orientation	Orientation Committee Various faculty/staff	Students	<b>Awareness:</b> SSFS folders and other info. given to students attending Orientation.	August 19, 2015
Logo on student computers	Marketing Committee IT staff	Students	<b>Awareness:</b> All student computer monitors display the SSFS logo.	August 2015
Pocket Cards	Marketing Committee	Faculty & Staff	<b>Awareness:</b> Cards containing the logo and slogan, along with important points, were be distributed to all faculty and staff during Professional Development Day. These can be kept in a wallet, purse, or desk	October 8, 2015

Marketing Timeline				
			as a reminder of the initiative	
WNCW	Marketing Committee WNCW Radio	Community	<b>Awareness:</b> short radio spots on our campus radio station highlighted our initiative and related events	August to October 2015
IC3 Connect	Marketing Committee SGA	Students	<b>Awareness:</b> IC3 Connect is an event that happens right after classes begin. Students were invited to come and get information on all ICC resources. There was also a SSFS booth and giveaways.	September 2015
Grub Day	Marketing Committee SGA	Students, Staff & Faculty	<b>Awareness:</b> Grub Day occurs every fall. Classes are cancelled. Students, Faculty and Staff participate in games and activities. This year the theme was dedicated to the SSFS. Students received a souvenir after completing a short quiz.	October 14, 2015

## APPENDIX G

## Master Academic Plan Rubric

Task	1- Incomplete	2- Partially Complete	3- Complete
Student can successfully identify his/her program of study			
Student can successfully identify the level of study: degree, diploma, certificate			
Student can successfully identify the correct amount of credit hours needed to earn a degree/diploma/certificate			
Student can make appropriate choices when faced with an option of multiple classes			
Student can successfully outline a semester-by-semester plan of courses which includes all classes needed for completion			
Student can successfully match his or her MAP with the intended program of study			
Student can identify barriers to completion of the MAP when applicable			
Student can identify resources that might be helpful when redesigning his or her MAP if needed			
		Total Score	

## ARTIFACT 1 – CONFERENCE PROPOSAL SUBMISSION

Thank you for your interest in submitting a proposal for the **35th Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience** to be held February 20, 2016 to February 23, 2016. You will be notified once the committee has completed reviewing your proposal.

<b>Proposal Type:</b>	Concurrent Assessed Initiative Proposal
<b>Program Chair:</b>	Yes
<b>Session Topic:</b>	Advising (Career and Academic) First-Year Seminars Orientation Programs
<b>Session Title:</b>	"Start Strong. Finish Stronger." Building a MAP for student success.
<b>Institution:</b>	Isothermal Community College  Affiliation: Two-year institution  Enrollment: Less than 5,000 students  Special Serving: None
<b>Program Chair:</b>	Vanessa Capps Registrar PO Box 804 Spindale, NC 28139 USA 828-395-4201 (p) <a href="mailto:vcapps@isothermal.edu">vcapps@isothermal.edu</a>
<b>Audio/Video Equipment Needed:</b>	LCD Projector and Screen
<b>Biosketch of Program Chair:</b>	Vanessa Capps is the Registrar at Isothermal Community College in North Carolina. She has served as a member of the QEP Development and Implementation Teams as part of the College's 2016 SACSCOC Accreditation. She co-chairs both the QEP's Educational Planning and Marketing subcommittees. She is a doctoral candidate in Western Carolina University's Educational Leadership program.
<b>Session Abstract:</b>	Students need to develop clear plans to persist and achieve their educational goals. At Isothermal Community College, Comprehensive Educational Planning, which includes mandatory orientation, an enhanced student success course, and dynamic advising, will provide students with guidance in academic goal setting and problem solving in order to remove barriers to completion. This session will give an overview of the Start Strong. Finish Strong. initiative, results, and lessons learned through the development and implementation of our Quality Enhancement Plan.

**Detailed  
Summary:**

State and national programs such as Completion by Design, Achieving the Dream, and SuccessNC are leading to an increased emphasis on student completion driven in part by President Obama's 2020 goal to increase degree attainment from 40-60%. As a result, community colleges must adopt policies that continue to foster student success and promote retention while ensuring that quality education and availability of services are provided. Anticipating legislation, the North Carolina Community College System is moving toward a performance-based funding model to address these issues. The open-door mission will be challenged as greater emphasis is placed on successful completion rather than mere enrollment numbers. Isothermal's completion rate of 39% is well below the NC Community College System's (NCCCS) goal of 45.6%. To address these challenges, Isothermal Community College's QEP Development Team has engaged in intensive research to identify barriers to student completion, potential models to address the issue, and potential target groups to focus potential models. Through the research process, the development team recommended a strengthened entry and progression process for students. The "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." initiative educates, engages and empowers first-time college students to achieve successful college completion through comprehensive educational planning. Through the research process, the development team has recommended a strengthened entry and progression process for students including mandatory orientation, dynamic advising, and mandatory registration into a student success course within the first two semesters. Each component expands upon the others to create the comprehensive plan for students. This is enhanced by the development of a Master Academic Plan (MAP) to help students with problem solving and goal setting. Additionally, an Early Intervention Support Team will work intensively with individual students struggling with the college transition or personal completion barriers. It is our belief that focusing on building strong pathways from the beginning will lead to increased completion, progression, and retention.

**Evidence of  
Assessment:**

Initial benchmarks for the program are to increase fall-to spring retention from 67% to 75%, and progression from 67.8% to 75% by 2016, which exceeds the NCCCS goal.

Early results from the first pilot group of students attending orientation, completing a success course, and receiving dynamic advising indicate the interventions are effective.

79% of students in this group had a GPA of 2.0 or higher, compared with 65% of students only participating in orientation.

90% of students had earned at least 12 credit hours after their first academic year, compared with our state performance measure of 70%.

The average number of credit hours earned for the pilot group participating in all 3 interventions was 24, compared with an average of 21 for the orientation-only group.

The fall-to-spring retention rate was higher for the intervention group (87%) compared with the institution's retention rate (70%).

**Implications for  
Institutional**

The North Carolina Community College System has established two relevant performance measures: First Year Progression and Curriculum

**Improvement or Advancement:** Completion. These measures provided significant data for the College. As the national conversation about completion grew louder, the College's internal processes responded with greater concern. However, the exact strategy to remediate the College's below average rates for both measures remained unclear.

In 2013, campus listening projects and a review of best practices pointed towards clear tactics, including mandatory orientation, an enhanced student success course, and dynamic advising. These formed into a Quality Enhancement Plan called "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." As a college we focused on the question, "Are we doing the best that can be done to help students learn," and had to determine the relationship between completion and learning outcomes.

It became clear to Isothermal that the act of setting a realistic, time-bound goal, such as degree completion, is a learning outcome. In addition, the ability to solve complex problems, such as how to work two jobs while taking twelve credits, is a key learning outcome that can be achieved through successful student progression. Knowing how to progress in college and complete a degree requires the ability to anticipate barriers to a stated goal, reevaluate those barriers, and then adjust actions or revise the goal. It is purposeful inquiry.

The process that the College underwent to develop the "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." Initiative is similar to its student learning outcomes. As part of the goal setting and problem solving process, the College deepened its desire for student success and learning. In direct response of our core mission to improve lives, the College sees the potential for the learning outcomes obtained through the Initiative to transfer to future aspirations for our students, such as owning a home, completing another degree, or attaining a promotion.

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**Additional Presenters:** Yes

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**Representative 1**


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## ARTIFACT 2 – POLICY BRIEF

# Addressing Barriers to Success in the Community College

Vanessa Capps & Alice McCluney EDL 820 Spring 2014

<p>Goal and summary of the problem</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Page 2</p>	<p>Policy Implications to Improve Student Completion</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Page 3</p>	
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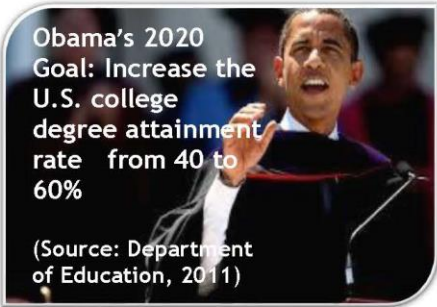
## Executive Summary

State and National initiatives such as Completion by Design, Achieving the Dream, and SuccessNC are leading to an increased emphasis on student completion.

As a result, community colleges must develop policies that continue to foster student success and promote retention while ensuring both quality education and support services are provided.

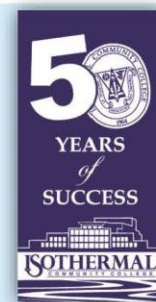
Anticipating legislation, the North Carolina Community College System is moving toward performance-based funding. The open-door mission will be challenged as greater emphasis is placed on successful completion. To meet these challenges, we recommend that

Isothermal Community College adopt the success intervention plan described below.



**Obama's 2020  
Goal: Increase the  
U.S. college  
degree attainment  
rate from 40 to  
60%**

(Source: Department of Education, 2011)



Isothermal Community College was founded in 1964 and is a member of the North Carolina Community College System. Isothermal is located in the foothills of western North Carolina and serves residents of Rutherford and Polk Counties.

The College enrolls 2,000 students each semester. The two-year public institution offers more than 60 degree, diploma, and certificate programs.

## How can Isothermal Community College remove barriers that prevent completion using academic planning?

The North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) has established student success targets as part of the statewide Performance Measures for Student Success with the primary goal to increase the percentage of students who transfer, complete credentials, or remain continuously enrolled from a six-year baseline of 40% for the fall 2004 cohort to a six-year success rate of 59% for the fall 2014 cohort. Doing so will double the number of credential completers by 2020 ([www.successnc.org](http://www.successnc.org)).

### Where does Isothermal stand?

Completion rates at Isothermal Community College (ICC) are currently 39.3%, which is below the North Carolina Community College System standard goal of 45.6% based on 2013 performance measures for student success (NCCCS, 2013). Completion rates have increased from 35% to 39.3% over the past three years. Although ICC's current rate is 11 percentage points above the baseline measurement set by the NCCCS, the rate remains 6 percentage points below the goal. Additionally, Isothermal lags behind several neighboring colleges in the key measures of success for student completion as referenced in tables 1 and 2. Through a professional development activity conducted by the Office of Assessment, Planning, and Research designed to gain insights from faculty and staff regarding students' greatest learning need, three key themes were identified:

1. To remove barriers to success, our students need engagement and motivation to think critically and learn.

2. To be job or transfer ready, our students need educational planning focused on completion.
3. To succeed when entering college, our students need improved computer and technology skills (unpublished raw data, 2013).

Using this information, the Isothermal Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) Steering Committee determined that the focus of the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for ICC's 2016 reaccreditation will focus on removing barriers to completion through academic planning. Based on a scholarly review of current literature the QEP Development Team has identified five specific barriers that prevent completion:

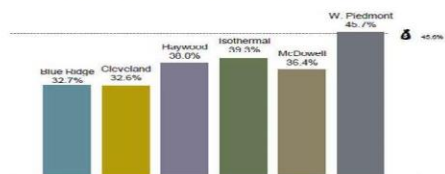
1. Inadequate academic preparation
2. Remedial education
3. Student financial aid
4. Lack of non-academic skills
5. Competing obligations

To address these barriers, the Team researched potential models and has presented a success intervention plan for implementing enhancements to affect positive change in completion rates and student success for students at Isothermal Community College. The plan includes:

1. Incorporating a mandatory orientation program
2. Offering proactive professional advising sessions
3. Promoting a heightened emphasis on first-year success courses

Table 2

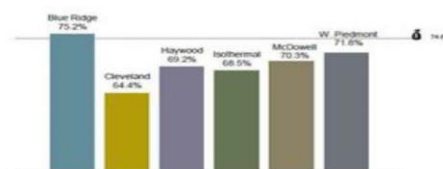
NC Performance Measure  
Curriculum Student Completion Fall 2006 Cohort



Description: Percentage of first-time fall credential-seeking students who graduate, transfer, or are still enrolled with 36 hours after six years.

Source: Office of Assessment, Planning, and Research, 2013

NC Performance Measure  
First Year Progression, Fall 2011 Cohort



Description: Percentage of first-time fall credential-seeking students attempting at least twelve hours within their first academic year who successfully complete ("C" or better) at least twelve of those hours.

## Best Practices in Promoting Student Completion

### Mandatory Orientation

Often, students who attend community college decide late that they will enroll and have little information about how to navigate the experience. They are often unprepared for the expectations and how to go about studying for classes and how to manage their time (Gandara, Alvarado, Driscoll, & Orfield, 2012). Orientation programs and student success courses can help students begin to navigate the college experience and build college knowledge. Yet, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) found that while 97% of colleges offer some form of orientation, only about 60% of students participate (2013). Rath et al. (2013) found that only 38% of colleges had instituted mandatory orientation. Valencia Community College in Florida initiated a student success plan that included mandatory orientation as one of the components. Three years after implementing their LifeMap initiative, Valencia's graduation or transfer rate increased to 51% compared to 39% for the national average (Adam, 2012). Durham Technical Community college implemented mandatory orientation in an effort to improve its 69% first-to-second semester retention rate in 2006. By 2010, they had increased their retention rate to 89% (CCCSE, 2012).

### Professional Advising and Proactive Coaching

Another critical component to building non-academic skills lies in the area of advising and academic planning. Many community college students don't know how to sequence their classes to move through a program and need support of advisors to build those skills and keep them on course. Studies have found that students don't take adequate advantage of these resources. CCCSE (2013) found that faculty members referred students to advising and planning services 85% of the time, yet students were only using

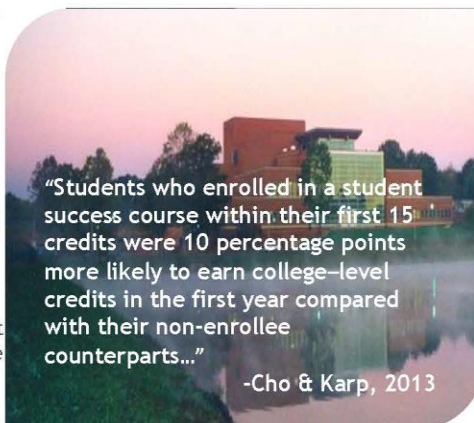
advising and planning services 54% of the time.

Data from institutions that have implemented mandatory or proactive advising indicate that such measures lead to higher graduation rates. At Zane State College, for example, students who received proactive advising and successfully completed their first year had a 90% chance of graduating within three years (CCCSE, 2013). The University of South Carolina implemented a proactive advising model centered around coaching students toward academic success and engagement on campus. Assessment of the model indicated that 92% of students referred to the coaching center improved their GPA and demonstrated academic improvement. In addition, 40% fewer students were suspended than predicted (Robinson & Gahagan, 2010).

### Success Courses

Research shows that students who take a student success course early are more successful than students who take it later or never take the course at all (Cho & Karp, 2013). Houston Community

Continued...



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*Improve Life Through Learning*

College tracked the persistence of students who enrolled in a student success course compared to students who did not take such a course. Students taking the success course persisted from fall-to-spring at an 80% rate compared to a 75% persistence rate for students who did not take the course (CCCSE, 2013). A similar comparison at Brazoport College found that students taking the success course persisted at an 89% rate compared to 66% persistence baseline rate (CCCSE, 2012). These courses allow students a longer opportunity than orientation alone or in a single advising session to build relationships with instructors and students, and make connections to campus resources that are available to help them navigate college.

## Policy Recommendations for Isothermal Community College

Currently, existing policies regarding student success are disjointed and are not consistently enforced across the institution. The success intervention plan seeks to align college priorities and provide a clear, concise outline for policy adoption that is easily interpreted and enforceable. The plan is based on the Completion by Design initiative and focuses on the first three components of connection, entry, and progression within the student loss/momentum framework.

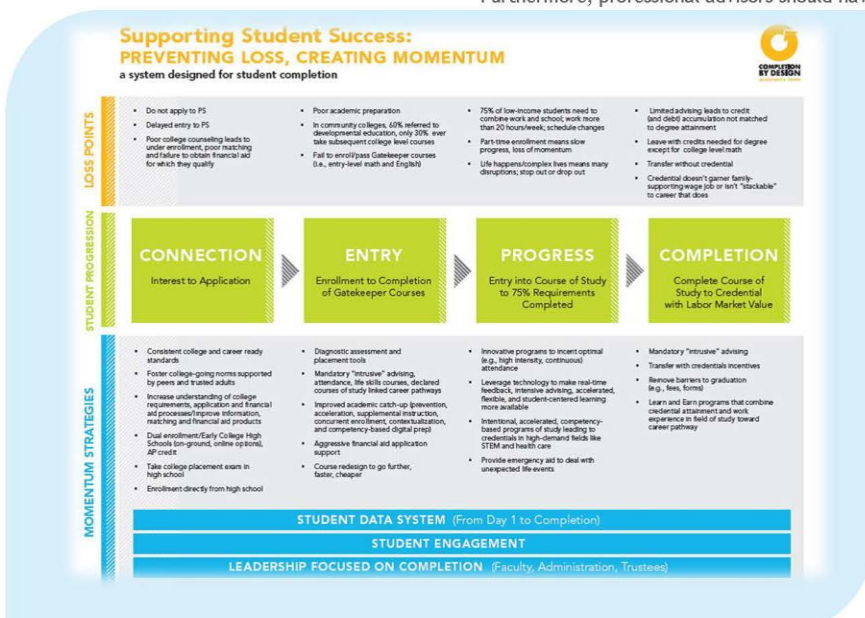
Historically, ICC has offered an orientation to recent high school graduates but has not extended the invitation to traditional students. Orientation has

been a supplement rather than an admissions requirement.

It is the recommendation of the Team that a mandatory orientation be implemented for all new students. Additionally, an online option must be made available for distance learners. Orientation should focus on the core things students need to know in the first two to three weeks of school and include technology access, financial aid knowledge, student support services, and how to communicate effectively with instructors.

Students at ICC are required to meet with advisors each semester. Advisors are traditionally ICC faculty and have not received professional training, nor do they have the time for the robust proactive sessions that are shown to boost student success. Currently, advising sessions are simply a time for schedule planning and registration.

The Team recommends the adoption of a proactive coaching model that would utilize professional advisors for all first-time students. Objectives of the sessions should be to establish students' life goals and assure they are in the correct program of study to achieve those goals. Students should come out of their first semester coaching experience with the knowledge to navigate Patriot Port (ICC's student web-portal), and a customized educational plan based on their developmental needs and long-term goals. Registration and advising are completely separate acts and it is imperative that a distinct separation between the functions exist (Schuermer, 2013). Furthermore, professional advisors should have



student development backgrounds and academic coaching should be their priority. They should be trained to advise across program areas with the expertise of the faculty and be housed in a central location (King, 2002).

Every Associate's Degree Program at ICC has a required success course; however, students have been allowed to enroll at the end of their program or have been granted exemptions from the course at the time of graduation.

The Team recommends that all ICC students be required to register for a success course within their first 15 credit hours. By requiring first time students to be coached and possibly registered with a professional advisor/coach, registration into ACA early could be aided. The College should explore the possibility of creating program specific sections of ACA for learning communities. The Business Sciences Department is currently piloting this concept which provides opportunities for increased engagement among peers and faculty. Careful exploration of scheduling practices should be considered in order for students to be able to take ACA within their first 15 credit hours.

## Conclusion

The success intervention plan will integrate strategies for reducing the impact of aforementioned success barriers. By focusing on student entry and identifying various loss points that prevent students from successfully connecting with their college environment, Isothermal Community College has the opportunity to positively impact the greatest number of students. Policy considerations that will build a successful intervention plan into the college environment include:

- Mandatory orientation for all new Isothermal students that will address inadequate academic preparation and create a solid educational foundation.
- Proactive coaching with professional advisors early and often during the first year and possibly beyond. This element will focus on encouraging enrollment in and completion of remedial courses, and engaging dialogue with students who have competing obligations.
- Mandatory registration into a student success course within the first 15 credit hours. These courses provide information about College support services, including financial aid, and provide connections between students and college faculty and staff. The courses also address students' lack of non-academic skills and build college knowledge.



### SuccessNC Initiative

SuccessNC is an initiative from the North Carolina Community College System to begin to address student completion concerns at the state level. Three guiding goals have been established:

1. Improve student success
2. Improve student access
3. Ensure program excellence

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ARTIFACT 3- JOURNAL ARTICLE

START STRONG. FINISH STRONGER.  
AN EVALUATION OF ISOTHERMAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE'S  
STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVE

By

Vanessa Littleton Capps and Alice Lorraine McCluney

February 2016

## Introduction

State and National initiatives such as Completion by Design, Achieving the Dream, and SuccessNC are leading to an increased emphasis on student completion driven in part by President Obama's 2020 goal to increase degree attainment from 40 to 60% (Kanter, Ochoa, Nassif, & Chong; 2011). As a result, community colleges must develop policies that continue to foster student success and promote retention while ensuring both quality education and support services are provided. Anticipating legislation, the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) is moving toward performance based funding. The open-door mission will be challenged as greater emphasis is placed on successful completion. To meet these challenges, Isothermal Community College (ICC), a small community college located in Spindale, North Carolina, has adopted a student success intervention plan, "Start Strong. Finish Stronger."

NCCCS evaluates each of the community colleges annually using 14 key performance measures including student completion, progression, passing rates on key licensure exams, and passing rates on developmental courses and subsequent college level courses. Additional funding is provided to schools performing at or above predetermined goal rates set by NCCCS. The primary goal to increase the percentage of students who transfer, complete credentials, or remain continuously enrolled from a 6-year baseline of 40% for the fall 2004 cohort to a 6-year success rate of 59% of the fall 2014 cohort. Doing so will double the number of credential completers by 2020 ([www.successnc.org](http://www.successnc.org)).

With both a national and state focus on student completion and success, ICC has been particularly concerned with monitoring progress toward the NCCCS goal for program completion, which is 45.6% (NCCCS, 2014). In 2013, ICCs completion rate was 39.3% and for 2014, it was 38.6% (NCCCS, 2013 & 2014). NCCCS defines completion as a first year student who either completes a degree, diploma, or certificate within six years of beginning; a student who transfers to a four-year college or university with at least 30 credit hours within six years of beginning; or a student who has continued to be enrolled and progressing with at least 30 credit hours earned within six years of beginning at the community college. Since completion is not really determined with a cohort until six years after entering into the college, ICC has also looked closely at



successful first-year student progression as a predictor of completion success. NCCCS defines successful first-year progression as a first-year student who attempts and completes at least 12 credit hours within the first academic year (fall, spring, summer). In 2013, ICC's progression rate was 68.5% and the 2014 rate was 67.8%, falling short of the NCCCS goal of 74.6%. (NCCCS, 2013 & 2014).

To engage stakeholders in addressing the issue of student completion, ICC embarked on a series of activities to solicit feedback and involvement from many different groups. To begin with, all faculty and staff were asked what students' greatest learning need was at a professional development activity. Employees brainstormed various ideas where three main themes emerged: 1) to remove barriers to success, students need engagement and motivation to think critically and learn, 2) to be transfer ready, our students need educational planning focused on completion, and 3) to succeed when entering college, our students need improved computer and technology skills (unpublished raw data, 2013). After narrowing down the themes, students were engaged in various activities to solicit their feedback regarding their greatest needs. Students were surveyed to rank their priority regarding the three statements in which they most strongly agreed with the statement regarding engagement and motivation. They also engaged in focus group discussion within ICC's student success course, ACA 115 and ACA 122, and SGA forums in which they identified with needs for greater understanding of educational planning and resources to navigate the college experience.

After evaluating the feedback from faculty, staff, and students as well as institutional data regarding student completion and progression, ICC determined that focusing improvement efforts around removing barriers to student completion through academic planning was the best course of action for the college. At this point the "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." program was developed. Through the development process, various stakeholder groups were involved to ensure a strongly supported program emerged. Faculty, staff, students, community members, public school partners, business leaders, and board of trustee members were all surveyed to rank various intervention strategies that they felt would most impact student success. The strategies of orientation, enhanced advising, and academic planning all emerged from each survey group as

viable and important factors to improve success. Faculty, staff, and students contributed feedback to develop content for orientation and ACA 115 and 122 course improvements. Professional development opportunities were also regularly provided for faculty and staff.

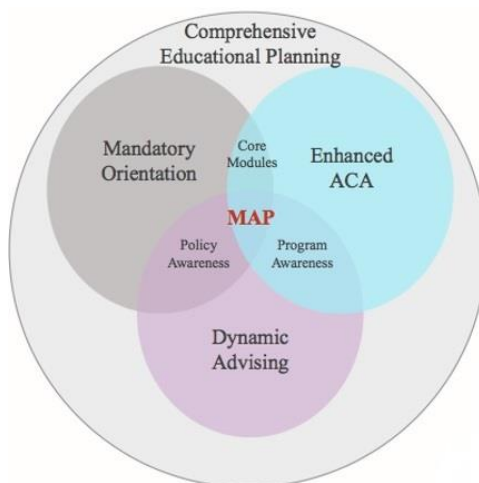
### **Program Description**

“Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” is a comprehensive educational planning initiative focused on empowering students to complete their educational goals through academic planning and problem solving. To accomplish this, the program includes the following components:

- Mandatory orientation offered both face to face and online
- Enhanced student success course (ACA 115 or 122) required within the first two semesters
- Proactive advising with the assistance of a support team of faculty, staff and instructors

The central focus of each of these components is the development of and progression through a customized master academic plan (MAP). The MAP assignment will be completed by first-year students in the enhanced ACA 115 or 122 course. The common assignment asks students to (1) identify academic goals, (2) understand program course requirements, (3) assess how long it will take to reach the goal, and (4) self-assess their MAPs. Figure 1 provides a Venn diagram model of the “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” initiative. The following sections will describe each component in greater detail.

Figure 1 “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” Conceptual Framework



“Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” targets all students entering ICC for the first time or after an extended absence from the College. The front door emphasis of the program will provide critical information related to student success during the orientation process at the beginning of the academic career. This information will be reinforced throughout the semester-long ACA course and at each meeting with the academic advisor. The program uses the planning framework supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Completion by Design initiative (Nodine, Venezia, & Bracco, 2011; [www.successnc.org](http://www.successnc.org)).

### **Mandatory Orientation**

At full implementation, ICC will require all first time students to complete orientation within the first semester of attendance. This will be implemented by controlling registration using blocks on student accounts until an orientation quiz is completed with a 100% grade with unlimited attempts. The orientation is provided in a face-to-face setting the day before classes begin each term. An online option will be made available for those students unable to attend the face-to-face session.

The content of orientation is focused on what critical things students need to know within the first two to three weeks of beginning college. There are five module areas of content: (1) Welcome and campus life and culture, (2) Campus safety, student records, and important policy information, (3) Technology resources, (4) Financial aid policy information, and (5) Educational planning. Educational planning is where the MAP is introduced and the importance of enrolling in

ACA early is emphasized. The MAP concepts are reemphasized in each of the module areas as well. A pilot version of the orientation was delivered in Fall 2014. After module revisions from various feedback methods, another pilot orientation was conducted in Fall 2015 and online development was initiated. The finalized version of orientation was conducted in Spring 2016 with pilot online orientation being tested through the Spring 2016 term. Mandatory orientation will become effective for students entering in the Fall 2016 term.

### **Early Enrollment in a Student Success Course (ACA 115 or 122)**

ACA 115 and 122 have long been a program requirement for degree seeking students at ICC, but over time the course content had become less relevant and thus students were putting it off and advisors weren't recommending the class early (unpublished raw data, 2014). Well-designed first year experience courses have been shown to increase student retention and completion if required to be taken early (Cho & Karp, 2013). At full implementation, ICC will require all first time students to take ACA 115 or 122 within the first two semesters of their academic program. The preference is that students take the course in the first semester, but allowing two semesters will accommodate any scheduling issues students may experience in the first semester that prevents registration. Again, this requirement will be managed using registration blocks on students' accounts.

To further improve this component of the program, a subcommittee worked through the 2014-2015 academic year to revise the ACA curriculum to make it more meaningful and updated for today's students. The primary change made to the curriculum was to build a set of common assignments that expands upon each of the five orientation modules thus making the ACA course an extended orientation. The major task implemented with the new ACA course is the development of the MAP. The MAP assignment contains several different components to help the students begin to develop their individual program of study and customize it to their goals and timeframe. By requiring ACA early, students will develop their own goals and plan quicker and see their pathway to completion. Three sections of ACA 122 were piloted in Fall 2015 using the new curriculum. Eight sections are being piloted in the Spring 2016 term. All sections of ACA will

use the new curriculum content beginning Fall 2016 and the mandatory enrollment criteria for students will go into place at that time as well.

### **Proactive Advising**

Once the MAP assignment is completed in the ACA course, most students should be able to proceed through their plan with minimal intervention. Each semester, however, students will meet with their advisors to review their progress with their MAP and make revisions if needed or offer reassurance that progress is being made. Students will not be allowed to register for subsequent terms unless they have met with an advisor who will remove their registration restriction.

For students who are struggling with their MAP and find themselves at a roadblock in their progression, a more intensive intervention is necessary. Through the use of proactive advising, an Early Intervention Team will be utilized to work intensively with students that are struggling. A teacher or advisor can identify students directly using an Early Intervention Form when students show at risk behaviors in class such as poor attendance, missing assignments, etc. In addition to instructor identification, the Early Intervention Team will monitor other risk factor data such as course “no shows” and financial aid warning statuses to proactively seek out students to work with more intensively. With the help of the Early Intervention Team, students will develop a new MAP or other action plans to help them structure a path back on course with their MAP.

Isothermal has embedded the MAP process in each component of the “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” program to help students start on the strongest possible footing for long term success and eventual completion. By being intentional about the comprehensive educational planning process and stringing a common theme throughout each interaction a student may have on campus, the College is helping to ensure that students meet their goals and that ICC is successful at creating a learning environment that promotes students’ progression and completion.

### **Data Collection and Results**

A logic model was developed to assist in establishing goals and outcomes for the initiative (see Table 1). As a result of the logic model process, two major goals were established for the program: (1) 75% of first year students will progress in their first academic year by obtaining a minimum of 12 credit hours within the first year (fall, spring, and summer) and (2) 46% of first year students will complete within six years of beginning. Because these success factors will take several years to obtain data from, interim success measures were also established to serve as indicators that the program is effective. Maintaining a GPA of 2.0 or greater is critical to maintain satisfactory academic progress (SAP) for financial aid and for graduation standards. Retaining students from each academic term to the next is another critical success factor to be examined through the process of this mini-evaluation.

Table 1

## "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." Program Logic Model

<b>Problem:</b> Students are not completing their degrees				
<b>Goal:</b> Improve student completion and progression rates to above the system office goal in 6 years				
<b>Resources/Inputs</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Outputs</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>Impact</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course schedules</li> <li>• Student handbooks</li> <li>• Student catalogs</li> <li>• Academic plans</li> <li>• Advisors</li> <li>• Counselors</li> <li>• Financial aid</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop content for orientation to help students start the school year on the right foot</li> <li>• Develop student success course to mirror orientation content and extend knowledge and skills in goal setting</li> <li>• Develop dynamic advising format to further engage students in goal setting and problem solving as plans go off track</li> <li>• Assessment of current course scheduling to identify backlogs in course progression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student will attend orientation before beginning their programs</li> <li>• Students will enroll in success course within their first year of study</li> <li>• Students will be advised each semester to reevaluate their academic plan and make revisions as necessary</li> <li>• Master class schedules will be revised to eliminate backlogs in progression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will have college knowledge to start the school year off strong</li> <li>• Students will develop problem solving skills to construct an academic plan to achieve their goals</li> <li>• Students will be able to navigate through problem solving if plans and goals change to revise their academic plan</li> <li>• Students will be able to get the classes that they need when they need them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More students will progress in their programs (Goal 75%)</li> <li>• More students will complete their program within 6 years of beginning (Goal 46%)</li> <li>• More students will maintain a 2.0 GPA or higher</li> <li>• More students will be retained from term to term</li> </ul>
<b>Planning</b>		<b>Intended Results</b>		

The first year full pilot student cohort for fall 2014 was selected using an Informer database query that selected all first-year students from the ICC student management database. This query identified 424 first year students for Fall 2014. This number does include students who enrolled in college classes while still in high school, but who's first term enrolled after high school

graduation was fall 2014. Of this total cohort, 131 participated in New Student Orientation in August 2014. From the orientation participants, 67 also completed a student success course within their first academic year (ICC, 2014 & 2015).

In addition to the full pilot cohort of students receiving all interventions, a second pilot of the refined ACA curriculum emphasizing the development of the MAP with students was conducted in the Fall 2015 term. Three sections of ACA 122 were taught using the revised curriculum. Comparisons of the student performance between the three pilot sections and all other sections of ACA 115 and 122 were made to evaluate the significance of the new curriculum in strengthening the overall intervention plan. Sixty students enrolled in the pilot sections and 241 students enrolled in all other sections of the success courses.

Each of these cohorts of students were processed through a variety of Informer queries to determine the average GPA for each group, the percentage of students with a 2.0 GPA or better, the fall-to spring retention and fall-to-fall retention for each group the credit hour attainment, and the percentage of students earning a minimum of 12 credit hours within the first academic year.

### **2014 Full Pilot Cohort**

#### **Grade Point Average (GPA).**

In September, 2015, the GPAs of the students in the complete intervention cohort were analyzed after a full academic year of coursework and compared to those of students who only received part of the interventions. The full cohort of first year students had an average GPA of 2.5 with 69% earning a 2.0 minimum GPA. Unexpectedly, the students who attended orientation had a slightly lower average GPA (2.37) and percentage with a 2.0 or higher GPA (65%). However, the students who attended orientation and completed a student success course had an average GPA nearly half a point higher than the whole cohort at 2.93 and 79% maintained at least a 2.0 GPA through their first year (See table 2).



Table 2

Grade Point Average Comparison of Full Intervention Group to Total New Student Population

	Number of Students	Average GPA	Percent of students with 2.0 or higher GPA
All new students Fall 2014	n=424	2.45	69%
New students attending orientation Fall 2014	n=131	2.37	65%
New Students attending orientation and completing a success course	n=67	2.93	79%

(ICC, 2015)

**Retention.**

Retention is defined as students enrolling in one term and subsequently re-enrolling in future terms. This project examines fall 2014 enrollment to spring 2015 re-enrollment and fall 2014 enrollment to fall 2015 re-enrollment. Fall to spring retention usually closely mirrors first year progression rates.

The whole new student cohort had a 60% return rate from fall 2014 to spring 2015 and a 49% return rate to fall 2015. The students who attended orientation improved the fall to spring retention rate by 15-percentage points at a 75% return rate. They improved the fall-to-fall retention rate by 11% points to 60%. Even more significant are the retention rates for students who attended orientation and completed a student success course. These students improved the total cohort retention rate of 60% from fall 2014 to spring 2015, 27-percentage point to 87%. They increased the fall 2014 to fall 2015 retention rate from 49% for the full cohort to 75% for their cohort. This is an increase of 26 percentage points (See Table 3).

Table 3

Term to Term Retention Rate Comparison of Full Intervention Group to Total New Student

Population

	Number of Students	Fall 2014 to Spring 2015 Retention Rate	Fall 2014 to Fall 2015 Retention Rate
<b>All new students Fall 2014</b>	n=424	60%	49%
<b>New students attending orientation Fall 2014</b>	n=131	75%	60%
<b>New Students attending orientation and completing a success course</b>	n=67	87%	75%

(ICC, 2015)

**Progression.**

First year progression is defined as completing 12 credit hours within the first academic year of enrollment (fall, spring, summer) and is the strongest indicator of progress towards meeting the state goal of a 75% progression rate. The whole first year cohort earned an average of 19 credit hours in the first year with 60% earning at least 12 credit hours. The cohort that attended orientation improved the average credit attainment to nearly 21 credits and 71% earning at least 12 credit hours in the first year. The group that attended orientation and completed ACA increased the average credit hour attainment to 24 credits with 90% earning at least 12 credit hours in the first year. This is a 30-percentage point increase compared to the entire new student population (See Table 4).

Table 4

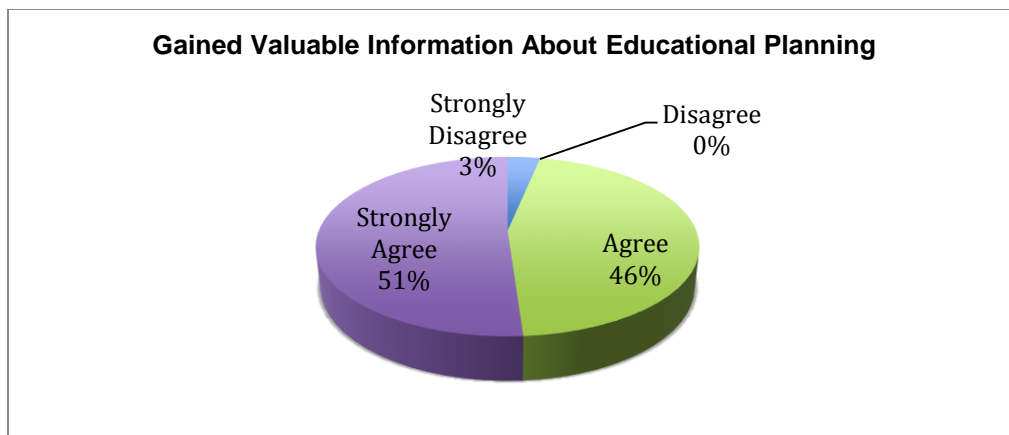
First-Year Progression Comparison of Full Intervention Group to Total New Student Population

	Number of Students	Average Number of Credits Earned in Year One	Percent of new students completing at least 12 credits in Year One
<b>All first-time students Fall 2014</b>	n=424	19.36	60%
<b>First-time students attending orientation Fall 2014</b>	n=131	20.92	71%
<b>First-Time students attending orientation and completing a success course</b>	n=67	24	90%

(ICC, 2015)

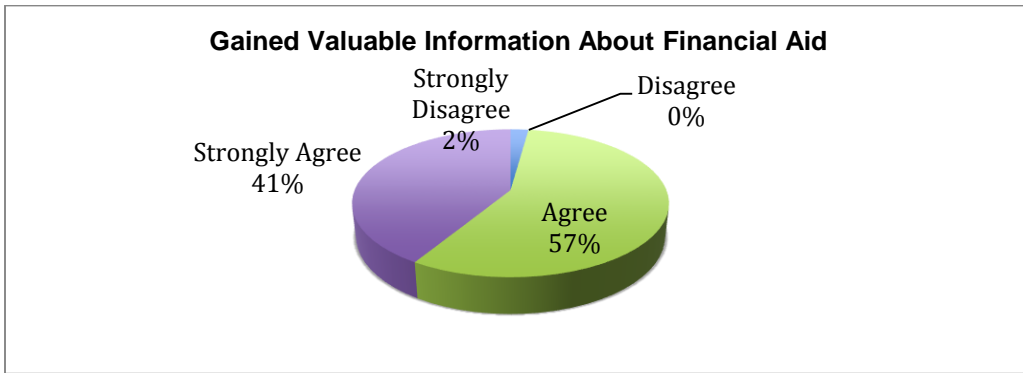
Additional data were gathered regarding the actual content of the orientation modules in order to assess the need for revisions to the content in subsequent cycles before mandatory orientation is implemented. Orientation participants were asked to evaluate whether they gained valuable information on each module section of the orientation by choosing either strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Students were then offered the opportunity to elaborate with specific comments on each section (see charts 1-5).

Figure 2 Pilot Orientation Survey: Educational Planning



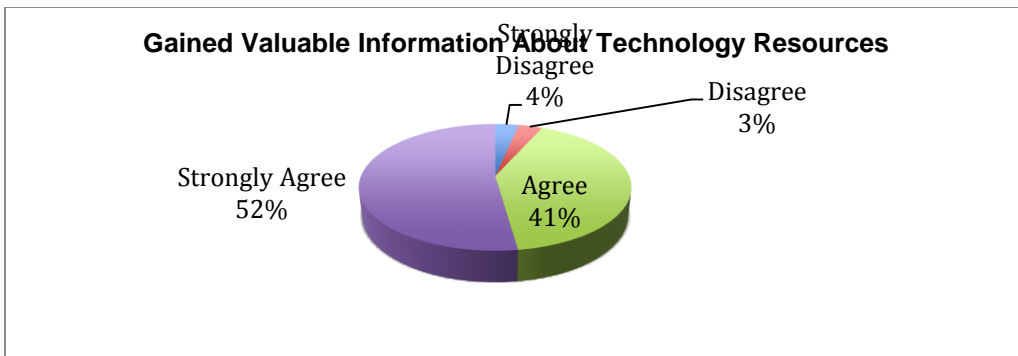
(ICC, 2014)

Figure 3 Pilot Orientation Survey: Financial Aid



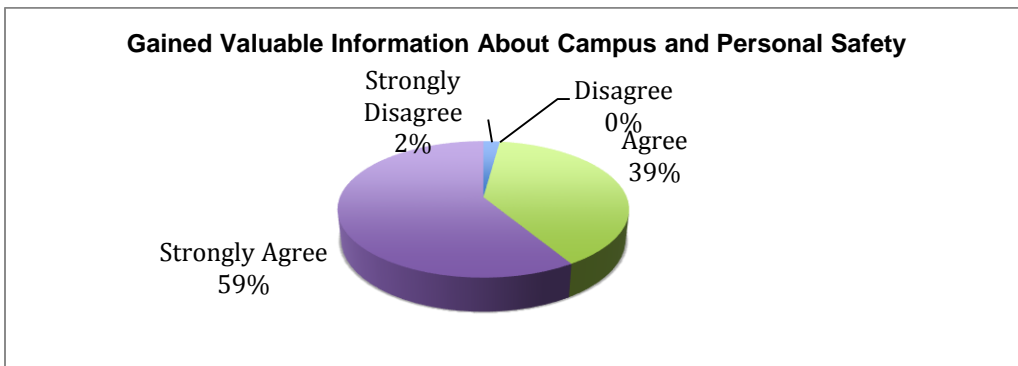
(ICC, 2014)

Figure 4 Pilot Orientation Survey: Technology Resources



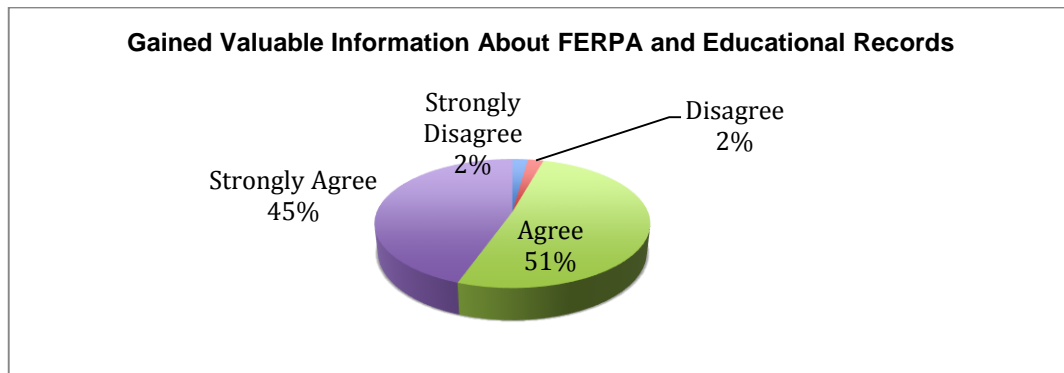
(ICC, 2014)

Figure 5 Pilot Orientation Survey: Campus and Personal Safety



(ICC, 2014)

Figure 6 Pilot Orientation Survey: FERPA and Educational Records



(ICC, 2014)

Overall, students either strongly agreed or agreed that they gained valuable knowledge in each of the content areas. The highest level of disagreement came from the technology resources section of orientation. It was determined through the qualitative feedback section of the survey, that students were dissatisfied with the amount of time in that section. There was not enough time to get logged in to their student accounts, which led to frustrations. For future orientations, this section was modified to exclude attempting to log students into accounts and focus solely on what each account was for and why it was critical to gain access. In lieu of spending time troubleshooting access problems during the content portion of orientation, student help desk staff was available before and after orientation to assist students with access problems. This assistance was also made available for several days before and after classes began for the term.

#### **Fall 2015 Success Course Pilot**

Students enrolled in a success course during the fall 2015 term were placed into two groups: those in the three pilot sections with revised content and those enrolled in a standard section with older content. The two groups were compared based on four areas: (1) GPA (2) progression of credit hour attainment, (3) retention from fall 2015 to spring 2016 semesters, and (4) grade distribution for the ACA course.

### Grade Point Average (GPA).

The students who enrolled in a pilot section of ACA had an average GPA of 2.46 while students enrolled in all other sections of ACA 115 or 122 had a slightly higher average GPA of 2.51. However, the pilot sections had a higher percentage of students with a minimum 2.0 GPA or higher at 76.7% compared to the standard sections at 70% (see table 5).

Table 5

Grade Point Average Comparison Pilot Success Course Sections to Standard Sections

	Number of Students	Average GPA	Percent of students with 2.0 or higher GPA
<b>Students enrolled in standard sections of ACA 115 or 122 Fall 2015</b>	n=241	2.51	70%
<b>Students enrolled in pilot sections of ACA 122</b>	n=60	2.46	76.7%

(ICC, 2016)

### Retention.

Isothermal saw 65.7% of the total student population return from the fall 2015 semester to the spring 2016 semester at preliminary review. Students who enrolled in the standard sections of ACA returned at a rate of 77.6%, while students in the pilot sections returned at a very similar rate of 76.7% (see table 6).

Table 6

Fall-to-Spring Retention Rate Comparison Pilot Success Course Sections to Standard Sections

	Number of Students	Fall 2015 to Spring 2016 Retention Rate
<b>Total student Population</b>	n=1734	65.7%
<b>Students enrolled in standard sections of ACA 115 or 122 Fall 2015</b>	n=241	77.6%
<b>Students enrolled in pilot sections of ACA 122</b>	n=60	76.7%

(ICC, 2016)

**Progression.**

Credit hour progression results were very similar between the two groups. Students enrolled in a standard section of ACA earned an average of 23.63 credits, while students in the pilot sections earned slightly more credits at 24.23 credits. Standard sections of ACA saw 71% of students earning at least 12 credits, while the pilot group earned just slightly more at 71.7% (See table 7). It should be noted that the students enrolled in ACA may not be first semester students.

Table 7

Progression Comparison Pilot Success Course Sections to Standard Sections

	Number of Students	Average Number of Credits Earned	Percent of new students completing at least 12 credits
<b>Students enrolled in standard sections of ACA 115 or 122 Fall 2015</b>	n=241	23.63	71%
<b>Students enrolled in pilot sections of ACA 122</b>	n=60	24.23	71.7%

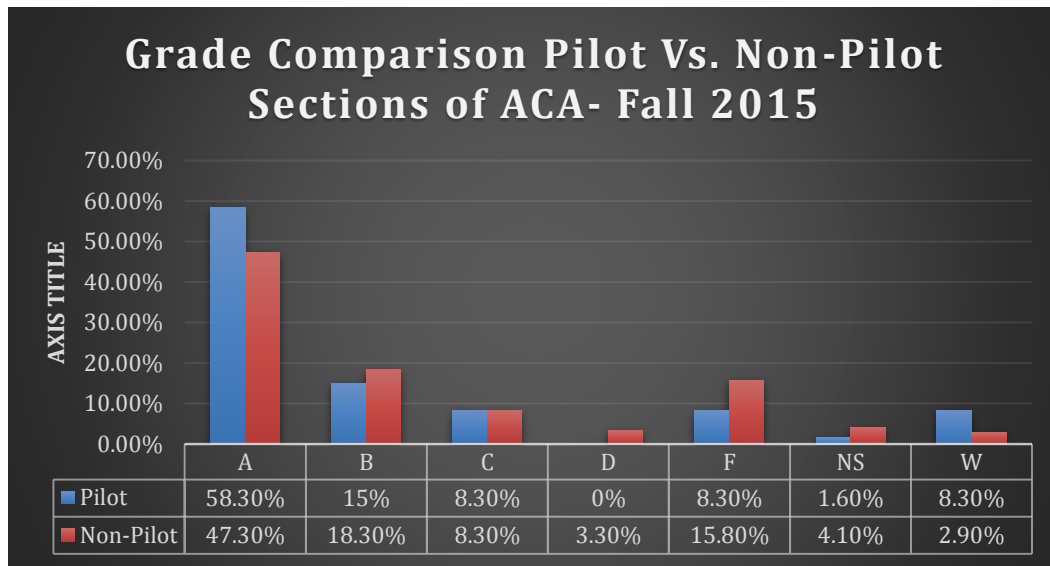
(ICC, 2016)

**Grade Distribution.**

The area of grade distribution indicated the greatest area of difference between the standard sections and pilot sections of ACA. The pilot sections of ACA 122 awarded 58.3% A's;

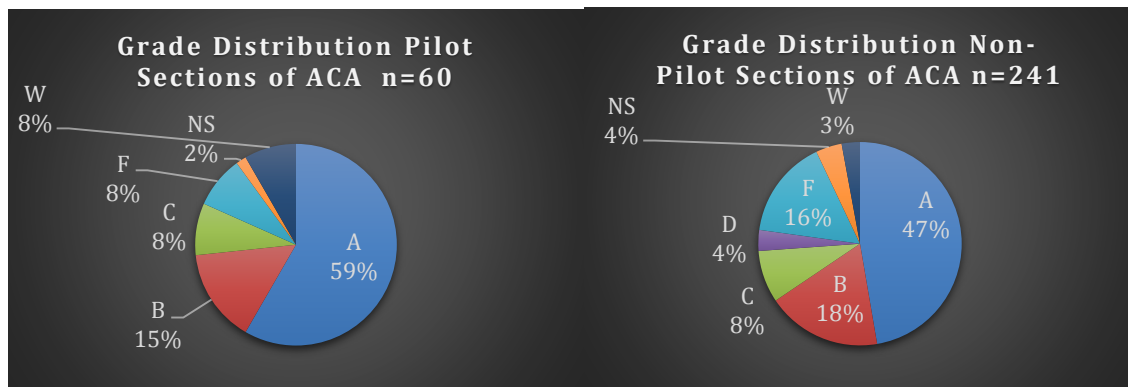
15% B's; 8.3% C's, F's, and Withdrawals; and 1.6% No Shows. Standard sections awarded 47.3% A's, 18.3% B's, 8.3% C's, 3.3% D's, 15.8% F's, 4.1% Now Shows, and 2.9% Withdrawals (See Figures 8 & 9).

Figure 7 Grade Comparison for Pilot Sections of Success Course to Non-Pilot Sections



(ICC, 2016)

Figure 8 Grade Distribution Comparison for Pilot Sections of Success Course to Non-Pilot Sections



(ICC, 2016)



## Conclusions

Early indications with the data available show promise that “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” will have a positive impact on student progression, retention, and completion. It can be argued that since orientation and student success course completion are not mandatory, the students who chose to participate are likely to be more successful students regardless of the interventions. However, the large degree of improvement between groups indicates that improvement should follow when full-scale implementation occurs. One area that was not fully evaluated at this time was the effectiveness of the new success course curriculum. The three pilot ACA sections are critical to assess the MAP assignment and its effectiveness in guiding students through their individualized pathways. Data specific to the MAP assignment were not available at the time of this publication. Subsequent evaluation cycles will examine students’ scores on the MAP assignment grading rubric to determine effectiveness of the assignment and students’ understanding of the critical aspects of being successful with their own MAP.

Interestingly, the comparison of students in the pilot sections of ACA and those enrolled in standard sections did not indicate a great deal of difference in overall performance in GPA, retention, and progression. It appears that enrolling in any section of ACA will lead to increased performance in these three areas. The area of grade distribution between pilot sections and standard sections was the only indication of major differences between the curricula. The pilot sections had a greater percentage of A’s compared to the standard sections, but the most curious area of difference was in the distribution of F’s, No Shows, and Withdrawals. Pilot sections of ACA saw 8.3% of students earning an F while standard sections saw a much higher percentage of F’s at 15.8%. Similarly, pilot sections only awarded 1.6% of their grades as no-shows, meaning the students never attended the class, while standard sections awarded 4.1% of their grades as No Shows. This is likely a strong indicator that the instructors in these pilot curriculums integrated a number of proactive advising techniques within the course such as contacting students in a variety of formats to ensure they attended classes. The pilot sections awarded a higher percentage of withdrawal grades at 8.3% while the standard sections only awarded 2.9% of their grades as withdrawals. This is another indication that the revised curriculum placed

greater emphasis on proactive skills for students and encouraged students to properly withdrawal before earning an F for the final course grade.

While it does not appear to make a difference which success course students enroll in, it does make a difference if students couple the success course with orientation attendance. The data indicate a much higher level of student performance if they attend orientation and enroll in a success course than if they only take the success course. As more sections of ACA implement the revised curriculum and instructor training is developed to emphasize proactive advising techniques, the grade distributions will likely continue to indicate students making wiser choices in these courses. There is enough encouraging evidence and future potential with additional interventions not yet implemented to continue the implementation process for the complete “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” improvement plan.

### **Ensuring Use and Future Recommendations**

A new “Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” committee has been formed to champion the complete implementation and development of the improvement plan. This committee is tasked with collecting data on a regular basis and evaluating the program to make recommendations for improvements. This structure along with the strong stakeholder buy-in that was established throughout the development process will ensure that data is used to make effective program decisions.

“Start Strong. Finish Stronger.” is a means of addressing the three needs that faculty and staff identified during a professional development activity; remove barriers, be job or transfer ready, and enhancing success with the use of technology. Mandatory orientation removes barriers and promotes student success by building college knowledge. Proactive advising addresses job or transfer readiness by establishing student goals and making sure that students are in the correct major to fulfill these goals. Once student long-term goals are established, program advisors are enlisted to ensure that the student succeeds in the shortest amount of time and is “job ready”. Students will also maintain a relationship with the advisor to encourage student success and to assist in removing barriers to success, promoting engagement and

motivation. Mandatory ACA addresses all of the faculty and staff concerns. The course removes barriers through promotion of college knowledge, promotes student success by building relationships with other students and instructors, and enhances job and transfer readiness through several of the lessons that focus on these areas. The emerging themes provided valuable insights and direction toward several interventions that show promise of positively impacting early intervention and student success practices at Isothermal.

Future evaluation cycles should examine not only those students that passed the student success course, but also those who enrolled and did not pass to get a better indication of student performance. Evaluations should also compare students in the pilot sections of the student success course to those in the traditional sections of the course to determine if the new curriculum is making a significant difference in terms of success indicators examined in this evaluation. Once proactive advising processes are established and early intervention forms are being routinely monitored, another evaluation area will need to be examined to assess if students being referred for early intervention are successful with additional interventions and monitoring.

It will be particularly interesting to monitor how the data are affected when each element of the program becomes mandatory and the entire new student population is participating in the interventions. An updated evaluation of the modified success course sections with regard to student performance on the MAP assignment will be particularly critical in the 2015/2016-assessment cycle as will evaluations of the online version of new student orientation. Every component in the "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." initiative has been designed specifically to meet students where they are and is easily adaptable to meeting their needs. The principles of "Start Strong. Finish Stronger." could be implemented in any educational environment at any level to help students succeed.

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