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A Multimethod Approach: Wake Technical Community College SunTrust Foundation Center For Financial Education At Wake Technical Community College



City, State	Raleigh, NC
City population estimate 2013	431,746 ¹
Campus Setting	Suburb: Large
Fall 2013 Student Enrollment	19,160
Part-time	69%
Female	55%
White	52%
Latino or Hispanic	8%
Black or African American	23%
Other	17%
Age (25 and older)	47%
Pell grants received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	42%
Federal student loans received by full-time beginning undergraduate students	31%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2013–14, <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.

Wake Technical Community College (Wake Tech) is located in Raleigh, North Carolina. Of the 58 community colleges in the state, Wake Tech is one of the largest, with a fall 2013 enrollment of 19,160.²

Summary

Concerned by the national trend of increasing student loan debt levels and the incidence of default rates among student loan borrowers locally, the president of Wake Tech put out a call to action to increase the financial literacy levels of students and the Wake Tech community. Partnerships were forged with a supportive financial institution and an expert in building financial capabilities. This led to the creation of a multimethod financial literacy initiative tailored to the needs and learning styles of currently enrolled Wake Tech students, General Education Degree (GED) and Adult Basic Education (ABE) learners, prospective students and their parents, Wake Tech employees, and Wake County citizens. Named the SunTrust Foundation Center for Financial Education at Wake Technical Community College, the initiative launched in January 2013 and since then has served hundreds of participants.

Area of Need

The crippling student loan debt that is a national trend and student loan defaults by Wake Tech students motivated a close examination of the needs of Wake Tech students and community members in the area of personal finance. Learning about what students and community members know and don't know through structured focus groups and interviews was a way to craft tailored responses intended to help them be stewards of their education and financial decision making more broadly.

Program Description

The SunTrust Foundation Center for Financial Education at Wake Tech Community College offers in-person workshops and online videos, works with Wake Tech faculty to integrate financial education content into their lesson plans, and embeds content into campus events and social networks (in-person as well as through virtual media). The center's workshops are delivered by an expert in the field of financial capabilities from the National Financial Educators Council (NFEC).³

Center staff choose content and delivery methods to match the needs of different audiences. Following the launch in early 2013, from January to April, the center delivered 15 events through a variety of methods including workshops, open houses, and professional development training sessions for faculty and staff. The content is tailored to each group. Techniques for budgeting and credit card and student loan management were offered to students, whereas retirement planning and investing were offered to faculty and staff. A focus on student-loan borrowing and responsible repayment was included in an open house for prospective students and their parents.

In addition to in-person standalone events, an NFEC instructor works with faculty to incorporate meaningfully into courses content related to effective management of personal finances. For example, in an economics course, the focus might be on the long-term implications of investing, whereas in a cosmetology class, borrowing and navigating the business loan process would be more helpful to students aspiring to own salons. An array of NFEC online videos are also available on demand, covering money management, savings strategies, responsible borrowing, and planning for future financial goals.

The SunTrust Foundation Center for Financial Education at Wake Tech Community College is more of a conceptual center than a physical center, as content delivery occurs wherever targeted groups gather—whether in classrooms or in service facility space, as in the case of GED/ABE students. This allows for the flexibility to tailor content and delivery methods to the five key groups: Wake Tech students, GED/ABE learners, prospective students and parents, faculty and staff, and Wake County residents.

Exploration and Adoption Phases

The national trend in rising student loan debt was a motivating factor for conceptualizing the center. The risk of delinquent repayment or default is high among Wake Tech drop-outs, a trend prevalent among public two-year institutions. The college president attributed these trends in part to low levels of financial literacy and insufficient knowledge of how to navigate financial systems and institutions. To fill the knowledge gaps, the president invited student services and the Wake Tech Foundation—the fundraising arm of the institution—to think about developing a financial literacy initiative at Wake Tech.

Student services staff and members of the Foundation came together to brainstorm possible solutions for a financial literacy initiative that would be multifaceted and broad enough for students and the public. At the time, Wake Tech did not have any course offerings that covered management of personal finances, nor did it have a faculty or staff member with the time or experience necessary to teach personal finance. Funding was needed to obtain the expertise to shape financial capability content and delivery.

Wake Tech staff reached out to the philanthropic division of a local financial institution, the SunTrust Foundation, to assess interest in supporting a financial literacy initiative. Willingness to fund the effort was itself important, but Wake Tech was also looking for a funding partner that would champion and help shape the approach to building financial capabilities within the Wake Tech community. The SunTrust Foundation embraced the opportunity to contribute to Wake Tech's financial capability strategy and to associate its institutional brand with the effort.

While Wake Tech administrators were assessing options for funding partners, the staff began to look for content expertise. Flexibility in tailoring content and delivery suitable for diverse audiences was key, since Wake Tech staff envisioned expanding the scope of the initiative to include the wider Wake County community. Wake Tech selected the NFEC as its partner.

At the planning stage, a cross-sectional committee was appointed, consisting of loan specialists, financial aid specialists, Wake Tech faculty and staff, and community members. This group collaborated in making the program a reality.

Implementation Phase

The SunTrust Foundation Center for Financial Education launched its efforts in January 2013 by offering a series of workshops to GED and ABE students in the ABE Center over a five-week period. The workshops were offered one day per week at two different times (2:30 p.m. and 7 p.m.). They were delivered by an NFEC instructor who shared videos and led students in hands-on activities in the areas of budgeting, financial planning, building credit, eliminating debt, beginning to invest, and the repayment of student loans. A proactive goal of the coursework was to get participants to build an action plan for improving their own financial situations in sustainable ways.

Initially targeting GED and ABE students was an effective way for the center staff to work out implementation issues, such as where to deliver the first series of workshops and to assess how well the NFEC instructor resonated with students. The generally older GED/ABE students who tended to be juggling more expenses were considered a priority for exposure to the workshop content. The following phase included a series of professional development workshops for Wake Tech faculty and staff.

During the planning phase, a survey was administered to faculty and staff, which revealed the findings:

- 52% reported a moderate to low understanding of “personal finance topics (budgeting, credit, savings, debt, etc.),”
- 83% reported a moderate to low understanding of “retirement planning topics (investments, estate planning, etc.),” and
- 94% believed that courses dedicated to money management would benefit them.

Center staff soon grasped the need for an enhanced financial capabilities approach that was systemic in nature, not just isolated to at-risk students. Building confidence among faculty and staff would empower them to engage in discussions with students and to refer students to the Center’s resources. The targeted professional development workshop on retirement planning and investing covered investment preparation, risk management, inflation, and other areas of personal finance.

The center has also presented a series of workshops and events geared to a wider audience, a sampling of which follows:

- open houses for prospective students and their parents on financial aid and managing personal finances, co-led by a Wake Tech financial aid specialist and an NFEC instructor,
- project-based crash courses for students on a single topic, such as “Building Your Credit Rating,” and
- targeted discussions of financial tools led by Wake Tech financial groups, such as the Economics Club.

Leveraging opportunities for tailoring content is a cornerstone of the center’s efforts. As deemed appropriate, a handful of Wake Tech courses have been infused with financially relevant topics.

Customized delivery methods are being used to reach different audiences. For GED and ABE students, the in-person workshops were believed to be an effective means of content delivery that provided the level of program intensity these students need to work through material. For students who are accustomed to consuming information through online sources, an online learning interface provides 24/7 access to videos and interactive activities.

Ultimately, the justification for advocating that financial literacy content be incorporated into events and existing club activities, as well as into for-credit courses is to maximize the chances of reaching Wake Tech students who are characterized as “C.C.C.” or “Car Campus Car.” With their time constraints in mind, an enhanced version of the infused

approach is in the planning stages. It will aim to include opportunities for directly applying what is being learned in class. A possible example: Assisting cosmetology students to apply for small business loans or to leverage a matched savings account to help them reach their goal.

When recruitment and marketing are needed to attract participants, the center has relied on these types of tactics:

- referrals from Student Services and the financial aid counselors,
- word of mouth through student clubs that have engaged with the center,
- social media postings on Twitter and Facebook,
- campus-wide promotion of events on the Wake Tech website or through marketing materials distributed to departments,
- a “Spring Fling” event that gave students a chance to spend time in a money-booth full of cash and prizes, and
- a financial scavenger hunt for the chance to win an iPod or tablet computer.

Utilization and Effectiveness

The variety of ways the center delivers content to its audiences makes it difficult to estimate how many people have engaged with the center’s events and offerings. The workshops have reached more GED/ABE students than any other audience. At least 200 students participated in fall 2013. The typical open house may attract 500 prospective students and parents, but it’s likely that only a portion of them interact with the financial aid and education instructors, given the informal, voluntary structure that may attract some guests for just a part of the session.

In the case of a structured workshop series, the center works with the NFEC instructor to administer pre- and post-workshop test surveys to assess changes in financial knowledge among workshop participants. For instance, among GED/ABE students attending workshops in January 2013, a pre-workshop test consisting of 20 items about financial basics showed that only 37 of 79 participants (47%) passed the exam. By the end of the series of classes, post-workshop tests revealed that 72 participants (91%) passed the tests.⁵ Qualitative feedback indicated that students felt much more confident about money topics and thought the information would benefit them in the future.

Another method for capturing qualitative insights into students’ grasp of the material is through student testimonials. One student shared her story about acquiring skills and knowledge that she had put into practice. Her story was accessible as an online video for other students to watch. Gathering more testimonials will serve a dual purpose by helping to publicize the center’s resources while also providing center staff with insight about opportunities for program modifications.

Sustainability, Funding, and Challenges

Wake Tech believes the center is successful due to having cultivated champions across the campus. Partnerships within the institution have created opportunities for bringing tailored content into a variety of departmental offerings and events targeting students and parents, as well as faculty and staff. External partnerships with the SunTrust Foundation and NFEC have been essential to planning, program design, and implementation.

SunTrust Foundation has provided grant funding in the amount of \$35,000 to cover setup costs associated with the center's website, video content, and the NFEC instructor. Moving forward, the majority of funding needed to keep the center operational will be used to cover the costs of the NFEC instructor. Wake Tech continues to seek funding from the SunTrust Foundation and other potential supporters.

Wake Tech administration is confident that the center will continue to serve students and grow. However, recruitment of workshop participants is an ongoing task. Targeting GED/ABE students has been an effective outreach strategy, and infusing financial content into course lessons has helped reach students who might otherwise have been difficult to reach. Wake Tech is also considering using the following tactics:

- having financial education ambassadors promote the college's financial literacy initiatives,
- sponsoring peer-to-peer conversations about the relevancy of financial literacy to their lives, and
- working with NFEC to train students to spread the word about the center's programs and the potential benefits to participants.

The ultimate goal is to integrate the building of financial capabilities into Wake Tech's educational frameworks so that this competency becomes part of the culture. A community-wide cultural shift toward responsibly managing personal finances is a promising trend for the future.

Endnotes

- ¹ U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts. Data derived from Population Estimates, American Community Survey, Census of Population and Housing, County Business Patterns, Economic Census, Survey of Business Owners, Building Permits, Census of Governments.
- ² Details for this case study were gathered from phone interviews with John Saporilas, associate vice president, Enrollment Services, Wake Technical Community College on July 31, 2013 and January 24, 2014. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/>.
- ³ The National Financial Educators Council is an independent, for-profit financial literacy resource provider that uses an open source, social enterprise business model, <http://www.financialeducatorsCouncil.org/Financial-literacy-council/>.
- ⁴ SunTrust is a financial institution headquartered in Atlanta, GA, with a philanthropic arm called the SunTrust Foundation. SunTrust Foundation's mission is to provide monetary support to nonprofit organizations and institutions engaged in activities promoting education, health and human services, culture and art, and civic and community involvement that contributes to the social and economic development of the communities SunTrust serves. SunTrust Foundation Center for Financial Education at Wake Technical Community College *Inaugural Year Financial Literacy Initiative Report*, March 6, 2013.
- ⁵ SunTrust Foundation Center for Financial Education at Wake Technical Community College, *Inaugural Year Financial Literacy Initiative Report*, March 6, 2013, p. 5.