Improving the Retention of Nontraditional Students

**Description of Project:** My supervisor—Barbara Arthurs, the Dean of Student Services at Hawaii Community College—is nominating me for this recognition, but asked me to complete the application. While she recognizes a combination and series of campus contributions, narrowing it down to one and writing about it from my perspective is a challenge.

I wrote, coordinated, managed the budgets, and submitted completion reports for the Carl Perkins Achieving Standards HawCC campus plan for the period from 2002-2007, and have contributed assistance to the new plans since then. Over that period of time, I developed a case management system that included the development of several programs to assist, support, and retain students. I developed a comprehensive counseling/case management system to holistically assist students and eventually, the plan supported the services of two counselors, a counselor for students with disabilities, and a Job Placement Counselor. I provided outreach at the shops and classrooms and the other counselor located her office in the Business Education classroom building, so much of the time spent with students was done in their learning and cohort environments. Because not all students need case management, students were offered services if they were: at –risk, learning or physically disabled, economically disadvantaged, single parents, self-identified as needing services, or if they were a nontraditional student—students whose gender is underrepresented in their industry.

I worked with the Math Department to develop a preparatory Math course—1ABCD that would be financial aid eligible (39% of new students at HawCC place at this level). This course had to be taken prior to this through Hilo Community School for Adults and it was not eligible for financial aid. It was piloted with a college success course (that I taught and still teach) in a learning community. Math tutors were also hired to further assist students. The Math 1ABCD became a general funded course and at least three or four of these courses are offered every semester, and they usually enrolled over he class

I also worked with instructors to develop peer tutor positions, whereby vocational tutors—students in the same class and recommended by the instructor—were hired to assist students in their vocational coursework, something that HawCC had never done. In addition, I also developed Financial Aid Peer Advisor positions. I trained and supervised student assistants to work with students to navigate through the financial aid
process and online application. Eventually, the Peer Mentors moved to the Financial Aid office so that they could work more closely with that office.

I have a passion for working in the recruitment and retention of nontraditional students. I have been a member of the Nontraditional Task Force for several years and I was fortunate to learn and be mentored by Barbara Tavares. To further assist the nontraditional students, I developed a plan for additional services and it will be this project that this application will focus on.

I wrote an RFP for Carl Perkins funds to support and assist nontraditional students and was able to secure the funds to plan an active recruitment and retention project. The proposal focused on a comprehensive plan to recruit, but more importantly, to actively assist those who were already in their vocational programs of study.

The project included and began with the development of a club for female nontraditional students- Women in Technology (WIT) Club. Meetings were held monthly to educate and support females with some of the special and unique challenges that they faced. Presentations were provided on subjects such as: Financial Aid and Scholarships, Recognizing and Reducing Stress, Time and Money Management, Gender Equity, and Job Preparation.

In addition, I secured some end-of-the year funds for Tool Subsidy Scholarships, which were granted to nontraditional students who were not able to purchase the tools they needed to succeed in their program of study. Students applied for and were selected to receive the tools to use while in their program. They were allowed to keep the tools if they graduated or gained employment in their industry. These tool grants gave females the chance to use and gain proficiency with their tools so that they were better able to stay abreast with the hands-on classroom projects.

The capstone of the project was the WIT Conference, which was planned to recognize, support, and honor nontraditional students. Young women who decide to go into nontraditional careers are the pioneers, especially on the Big Island. They need to feel secure in their career decisions and meeting other women who have embarked into similar professionals can prove inspirational as well as provide reassurance that women can get hired in these professions. This was the inspiration behind the planning of the WIT Conference. Sixteen young women applied for and attended the WIT Conference that I planned, organized, implemented, and chaperoned.

The WIT Conference was a two day event that was held at the Hilton Waikoloa Hotel. On the first day of the conference, students were given a tour of the facility, from behind
the scenes. Students were able to job shadow with: electricians, chefs, the management team, or the landscaping team.

Students shared rooms at the hotel and the second day of the conference was held in one of the meeting rooms, along with a continental breakfast. I invited four female professionals from the community— an architect, an auto mechanic who owned her own shop and her female shop assistant, and a woman who worked for Volcano National Parks-- to speak with and mentor the young women.

The WIT Conference was the first, and for some, it might be the only conference that they will ever experience. It was uplifting, inspirational, and also served to elevate these young women in unforeseen ways. They persisted, they excelled, and they graduated! They became close with one another and they were a powerful force.

In my work with the project, I also took 100s of pictures and used them to create: a display board, posters, and bookmarks to be used to recruit females into nontraditional majors. I use and pass these out at: career and job fairs, apprenticeship expos, stores, shops, and businesses, all the high schools, school for adults, Workforce Development, DHS, all over the UH Hilo and HawCC campuses, and numerous other locations throughout the community. I even use some of the pictures of the young women working in my PowerPoint presentations for a class I teach. In addition, several of the photos that I took were used in UHCC systems publications and advertising campaigns.

**Quality:** Student participants, as well conference speakers/mentors, developed strong connections with one another. Student participants developed stronger commitments to their academic programs and to the careers that they were in pursuit of. All but two participants in the project graduated and gained employment or went on to a higher degree. Of the two that did not graduate, one is still working on her degree and the other had returned to gain additional Auto Cad skills and had graduated several years earlier.

Participant Evaluations were overwhelmingly positive and 100% of participants recommended that the project be an annual event. All strongly agreed that they enjoyed the conference, and 100% either strongly agreed or agreed that they had learned skills and strategies from the speakers that might be helpful in their educational and/or career planning. Students also gave an overwhelming amount of positive responses when asked what they had gained and what they would change or improve. (See Supporting Document: Participant Evaluations of the Women in Technology Conference).
This project forged community networking opportunities and even opened several employment opportunities for those who were within days of graduation. The project also encouraged the development of an informal support system among nontraditional students, and this was further enhanced through WIT Club activities. Students shared accomplishments, challenges, and frustrations and they became one another’s best source of support.

As part of Carl Perkins, the UHCC CTE office collects data to measure campus performance in certain core indicator areas. Perkins collects data on seven indicators, and two of these are nontraditional indicators: Nontraditional Participation (recruitment) and Nontraditional Completion. Over the period that the project was developed and implemented, both Nontraditional Participation and Completion Rates improved dramatically, and in fact exceeded the standard set by the state in both indicator areas. In addition, over time, the success of the comprehensive case management system became evident in the fact that the campus finally exceeded all the standards set by the state for the first time ever. In addition to exceeding the state standard in both nontraditional indicators, HawCC students also exceeded the state standard in Academic Achievement, Degrees and Certificates, Completers Employed, and Completers Retained in Employment after six months (See Supporting Document: HawCC Perkins Core Indicator Data 2002-2007).

**Replication:** This project would not be difficult to replicate at other campuses that have nontraditional programs. Funding is possibly still available through Carl Perkins RFP minigrants and especially those that are offered for nontraditional students. Ideally, it is a two or more person project and a couple of committed student workers—especially those in nontraditional programs of study—would also be helpful.

The biggest challenge was in the coordination of the separate details of the conference with our Business Office. It also took some time to work out details, such as finding businesses that would accept purchase orders for: gasoline for vans, food for dinner and lunches, hotel and conference room accommodations, speakers travel and stipend documents, etc.

This was a fun and rewarding project for me as well. I would like to have the opportunity to coordinate a similar project again.

**Creativity:** The project description contains and explains the unique, innovative, and creative aspects of the project. It was unique and innovative that students were able to attend a nontraditional conference, and I am not aware of another like it. Getting these
young women away from the responsibilities of children, work, partners, and the worries of life, really allowed them the opportunity to fully enjoy and experience the conference, to job shadow and to be educated and mentored by successful women from the community. This created an environment of professionalism, excitement, respect, cooperation, collaboration, and pride. Young women left the conference with an “I can do anything…” attitude.

I took pictures of nontraditional students at work in their program shops and at the conference. I used some of the photos to design and distribute Nontraditional Recruitment bookmarks, posters, and a display board to be used at community outreach events (Supporting Documents: Women in Tech folder with 5 enclosed documents of display board, posters, and bookmarks).