

support

FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

DC was the only college in Ohio to receive a grant to strengthen programs aimed at first-generation students

by Debbie Richard, '02, '04, Assistant Director of Marketing

In 2010, Defiance College was one of thirty colleges and universities - and the only one in Ohio - to receive a \$50,000 grant from the Council of Independent Colleges and the Walmart Foundation's Walmart College Success Awards. The grant was given in support of strengthening programs and support for first-generation students.

According to a survey given to first-year students, almost half of students entering their freshman year at Defiance College consider themselves first-generation students. Studies show that first-generation students frequently face transition issues with college different than those of non-first generation students. Many colleges, including Defiance, have services available to help students succeed. Services at DC include the First Year Experience program, Academic Resource Center, Pilgrim Library, offices of student life and career development, and the Partnership for Jobs program.

One of the initiatives put into place with the grant funding was the creation of the Connections Program. Twenty-six freshmen participated in the program in the academic year. During the inaugural year, they were placed in groups of five with a peer mentor and staff mentor. The groups met monthly to discuss various topics including transitioning to college, building a strong foundation with a network of resources, and time management. The students also met with their staff mentor at midterm and at the conclusion of each semester.

"The DC Connections Program focuses on five critical components of college adjustment: basic college knowledge, social integration, academic self-confidence, major and career exploration, and leadership development," said Randi Lydum, program



coordinator and director of student retention and First Year Experience. "We address these areas in small groups so students feel comfortable discussing issues and sharing personal experiences."

"Any freshman going to college feels a sense of anxiety because they're moving away from home, they're completely in charge of their lives, and they're starting over," said Kim Comden, a junior majoring in wellness and corporate fitness and a Connections Program peer leader. "The Connections Program helps incoming freshmen address those anxieties by offering guidance and relationships with faculty, staff and older students. This allows each freshman to enjoy their new lives at Defiance College and make every year count."

The goal of the group is for the students to make as many connections on campus as possible. Because first-generation students are motivated toward the end - meaning they are looking toward graduating with a degree that will get them a job - learning to network is important for their future goals. By being placed into small groups, students have peers that they can relate to and someone they can

go to when they have questions or need help.

"As a first-generation student and being a part of the Connections Program, it has allowed me to make good connections with the faculty and staff of Defiance College," said Cord Speelman, now a sophomore majoring in business administration with a marketing concentration. "Also, it helped me with my time management skills and to excel in my classes. If I was an incoming first-generation student again, I would not hesitate to join this program."

Chelsea Ludeman, a sophomore majoring in sport management, also agreed that "the Connections Program is a good way to help students succeed through the stresses of college, as well as setting up students to excel in the classroom and in other aspects of college."

A new group of first-generation freshmen has joined the program for the 2011-12 school year. The program encompasses many of the characteristics from the previous year, with more social events, speakers, and more frequent meetings as recommended by the previous year's Connections Program students. ♦