Bold Futures Workshop

Group question: Does NIU provide effective and compelling campus connections for non-traditional students, is this important to the students, and how could these connections be improved?

Of the nine students we interviewed, six felt campus connections were important to them. Reasons given were networking, the University Honors program (from two students), and Lambda Sigma Sophomore Honor Society. The three students who did not feel campus connections were important said it was because of age/life differences, their existing social network outside of school, they just wanted to get their degree requirements in, and are not very available anyway.

Overall praise given about NIU: Campus child care; transportation; the opportunity to receive an education here despite not-so-strong previous academic achievements; most faculty and staff go above and beyond; feeling connected by mentoring younger students; the resource centers help bridge gaps and are helpful to learn where to go and who to see; faculty and staff provide information needed about campus, and this makes the students feel more connected. One student didn’t find it difficult to navigate the university “systems” for academics.

Issues presented by the interviewees: Connections only happen if the student makes them happen. There was no place to go to get the information needed to navigate campus (students should be able to go to one place or one website to find it easily). Teachers assume everyone is tech savvy and knows how to use Blackboard, but these students had no knowledge or instruction. The “huskie shuffle” - one area telling you this is the rule/policy and another area saying it is different. This leaves it up to the student to figure out the issue. There is an inconsistency in advisors not leading students along the correct path to graduation, with an emphasis on advising offices in colleges not knowing general advising. The TRIO program is not helpful. General education courses are getting in the way of them advancing in their major. One student was unaware of the commuter lounge.

Suggestions given by the interviewees: Better communication; offer an orientation for their specific group (possibly ongoing to help mentor others), online admission process- have a banner going across the page saying “we have..” with things you need to know before starting, where to go for information, help with Blackboard, email, etc.; increase general advising staff to accommodate time for students to meet 3 times a semester; add an online advising navigator tool; have colleges work together on policies/rules to be consistent throughout campus; do a better job of promoting resources through the campus email; offer events for non-traditional students as well as their families and offer discounted hotel rooms for them after said events; more variation in class times (more evening courses); more sensitivity to concerns brought up by students (racism, grading, professors); Campus Child Care more responsive to parent concerns; a more secure feeling when safety messages are sent; more buses and more regular routes; Huskies Get Hired and job fairs better addressing student needs; better campus counseling; better advising for students who are highly motivated; more guidance for students who are not as motivated; more places for commuters to hang out; increase the size of the non-traditional resource center and include locker space.

One student felt there should be a “next steps” information packet or seminar during their last undergraduate semester that would assist them with the graduate school application process, GRE preparation, student at large status, procedures/deadlines, etc. They called the graduate school for assistance but were told this information should be addressed to all graduating undergraduates through some form of instruction.