



Paris Junior College: A Culture of Personal Attention

“I feel like it’s my personal responsibility to make sure that these students get through college, and I want every advisor in this office to feel like it’s their personal responsibility to get each student to a place they didn’t even know they could go,” says Tasha Whitaker, director of advising at Paris Junior College (PJC). “Every advisor is trained to listen to the student — to listen to what they are saying and what they’re not saying. And to watch body language. Those practices help us understand our students so we can help them be successful.”

This careful attention to students — who they are and what they need — is reflected in the way faculty, staff, and student view PJC.

“The faculty and staff at PJC would say, ‘Start here. Go anywhere,’” says PJC graduate Brendan Batchelder. “They focus on helping you develop the systems you need so you will succeed. I was able to get a lot of help for skills outside the classroom.” Batchelder earned an associate of science in biology in 2023 at PJC and currently is a student at Texas A&M in College Station. He is studying biomedical sciences with plans to go to medical school.

Creating a Culture of Acting Quickly and Thoroughly

“One of our best practices is to always answer email and always return phone calls, usually the same day,” Whitaker says. “It can be difficult with the number of students that we see here. But we have five advisors, and one of us is ready to jump in at any given time. That’s what keeps us running.”

“It’s not a written policy for faculty, but that’s the policy that we follow campuswide,” adds Jennifer Collar, division director, fine arts and communications. “If we get a question on Monday through Thursday, then we expect to give a response within 24 hours. If it’s Friday afternoon or over the weekend, then it’s a first-thing Monday response.”

This culture of connection is reinforced regularly. It is discussed at convocation and at the post-break, all-faculty meeting in January. And the idea of connection is not limited to being responsive by phone and email.



“If a student asks us for directions, we don’t just give directions. We walk them where they need to be, and that’s something that is constantly reiterated to faculty as well,” Collar says. “These are opportunities for connection, so we engage the student in these moments. We ask, ‘How was your first class?’ or ‘What’s your major?’ And always, always, we walk away knowing the student’s name.”

“One day as I was walking through campus, I met one of our janitors coming out the back door of the administration building, and she was accompanying what appeared to be a student and parents,” recalls Ed McCraw, dean of math and sciences. “I stopped and asked if I could help, and the janitor said, ‘Mr. Ed, I’m taking these people down to the office center,’ which is where we have advising and everything a new student needs. And I just said, ‘Yes, ma’am,’ and I got out of the way. I think that shows how the idea of connection and making students feel comfortable carries throughout the whole staff on campus.”

Listening to Students and Responding

The college uses surveys and focus groups to assess its connections with students. Despite all of the connection that is built into the PJC experience, the team can be surprised by what they learn.

“We recently had an eye-opening finding that we started to work on immediately,” Collar says. “An astonishing number of students, about 65 percent, did not realize that we offer mental health counseling on campus. They know that we have advising and regularly use that service, but they had no idea that mental health consultations are available.”

“We all started working on how to address this,” says Jack Brown, director of math and science. “We are making lists of the services that are available here on campus and in our community, including services such as hotlines that are free and where students can seek more in-depth mental health care.”

“We’ve talked about possibly requiring faculty to include some of this information on their course syllabus and perhaps providing a QR code that will take students directly to these services,” Collar adds. “And that made us realize that all faculty may not know about these services, so we may have work to do there, too.”

Building a Culture of Change Leads to Making Changes Quickly

“With pathways, we’ve built a culture of constantly upgrading what we do and turning our college into what students need right now,” McCraw says.

Making this type of change at PJC began with math pathways. “In the early years of math pathways, I would struggle with getting faculty to realize that change was necessary,” McCraw continues. “But now they see that the bottom line is whatever works for the students, so we make changes more easily.”



PJC began working with the Charles A. Dana Center on math pathways when former president Pam Anglin focused on success rates for college algebra, which were too low.

“I finally said that we were trying to teach too many students something they don’t need,” McCraw recalls. “I said that everyone does not need college algebra, and we need to give students the math they need — so math can be a gateway instead of a gatekeeper.”

Early in this process, not all faculty were enthusiastic about transforming the math program, but as they saw the success rates for quantitative reasoning and statistical analysis, they began to agree with the changes. And that process helped the college prepare for implementing guided pathways.

“Once the faculty saw the results, it got easier to get buy-in. People got on board with making the changes we need to see improvement,” McCraw says.

This culture of change is evident in the way PJC rolled out eight-week classes. In spring 2022, the college team attended a Pathways Institute and saw a presentation about eight-week classes by Grayson College, Kilgore College, and Odessa College.

“When we saw the data those colleges presented, we really embraced eight-week classes,” Collar says. “We had already put together our full fall schedule, but we went back to the drawing board and almost fully implemented eight-week instruction that fall, the very next term.”

She adds, “Data transparency was the key to moving so quickly. I can’t even imagine trying to get faculty on board without data. We were able to show data about our college’s performance compared to results from Grayson, Kilgore, and Odessa. That comparison helped faculty see where the change to eight-week instruction could take us.”

PJC rolled out eight-week instruction in fall 2022, just a few months after hearing the Institute presentation. For students enrolled in corequisite English, success rates increased dramatically — from 58 percent in spring 2022 to 67 percent in fall 2022.

The math program was not able to fully implement eight-week terms in fall 2022 and had a combination of eight- and 16-week classes. Data showed that for face-to-face instruction eight-week classes were more successful. However, for hybrid or fully online classes, students in 16-week classes were more successful. The math program continues to use a combination of eight- and 16-week classes while making sure that students are taking the right math class for their field of study.



Today, the success rate for corequisite STEM classes is 54 percent, which is an improvement from success rates in the 40 percent range before implementing corequisite education. For non-STEM math classes, the success rate has improved from 57 percent in 2021 to 79 percent in 2022 and 85 percent in 2023.

TSC Helps PJC Act on Fact

“The Texas Success Center (TSC) has changed the way we engage with data and connect it to student success. Now so many more of our decisions are data driven,” Collar says. “Before, we would think about how something seemed. Now we have concrete evidence of trends that we can see in the data.”

She continues, “We also value the time that we have at Pathways Institutes to look at and analyze our data. The Institutes give us time to find the meaning in the data and, most important, to figure out ways to act on it. It’s not just that we have the information but also that we know what we are going to do with it.”

“Hearing from other colleges and meeting with our colleagues from other colleges — not just in the formal spaces, but around the coffee bar — also has been beneficial,” Brown adds. “I’ve always said the best educators are just the best thieves. And at the Institutes, you get to hear all kinds of ideas from everybody and then make them your own.”

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