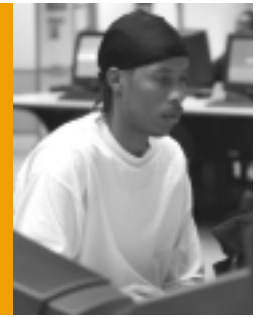


Albany State University Partners with PLATO Learning to Target Improvement in Pass Rate for Praxis I/PPST



When between 1997 and 2001 fewer than 25% of students in Georgia colleges of education passed the reading portion of the Praxis I test and less than 5% passed either writing or math, the Dean of the College of Education at Albany State University, Dr. Barbara Holmes, decided it was time to address the situation. Most disturbing to Dr. Holmes were the differences in scores between black and white students.

Committed to the community

Albany State has been a catalyst for change in Southwest Georgia from its inception as the Albany Bible and Manual Training Institute to its designation as a university. Founded in 1903 to educate African American youth, the university continues to fulfill its historic mission while serving the educational needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Proud of its reputation as a progressive institution, Albany State responds to the needs of all its constituents and offers educational programs and services to improve the quality of life in Southwest Georgia.

The Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Initiative

Albany State and Dr. Holmes played a central role in creating the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Initiative. Today, colleges of education at 10 schools within this group have adopted the PLATO Simulated Pre-Professional Skills Test (PPST) to help raise the pass rate on the Praxis I, an initiative supported by the HBCU Council of Deans of Colleges of Education.

Underlying philosophy

Accordingly to Dr. Holmes, "In order to teach others, you must know it yourself." PLATO Learning shares this view. Education students must achieve competency in the subject matter they will teach and be able to combine theory with practice. Ultimately, teachers must be better prepared for diverse, real-world classrooms and the school settings they will encounter on the job. "We need to move towards learning platforms in which students can continually self-assess and self-remediate, thus ensuring learning independence," said Dr. Holmes. She has stressed that that Albany State's goal is to develop smart learners, not smart classrooms. The university wants to redefine the college classroom to be a place where learning occurs, not just where desks and chalkboards reside. Albany State is working hard to create a performance learning culture that empowers students to identify their own skill gaps and improve them with a "hold hands and stick together" approach (as defined by Dr. Holmes) in which the learning environment is personal, collaborative, and accountable.

Program implementation

The program developed by Albany State and PLATO Learning is made up of several key stages. First, each student is administered the PLATO Simulated Pre-Professional Skills Test as a pre-test to identify skill gaps and a related prescription for improved learning performance. Students then work in PLATO Learning labs for a period of time each week to address identified skill gaps. The PLATO Instructional Solutions courseware tests and documents the lessons each student has mastered. Finally, students take the PPST as a post-test to measure knowledge gained and ensure they are prepared to take the actual Praxis I/PPST test required for their studies.

Albany State closely monitors students' progress throughout the program of intervention. Using the PLATO Web Learning Network learning management system, university staff track the number of modules mastered vs. prescribed; the number of modules exempted vs. completed; and skills gained vs. skills already acquired. The project will also track student pass rates on the Praxis I examination after 30 or more hours of working with PLATO Instructional Solutions software and compare results with those of test takers from the previous year who did not participate in the PLATO Learning program.

Albany State believes its success comes from a learning culture committed to individual success, structured intervention with pre- and post-testing, the dedication and training of knowledgeable instructors, and student access to PLATO Learning software, with its unique ability to analyze and prescribe, as well as design personalized learning paths and a pedagogy of individual inquiry.

Student feedback

"Our students tell us that the PLATO Learning experience is giving them more confidence in their own abilities. They now realize that anything can be taught and learned if you work hard at it," says Dr. Holmes. "They discover that continuous assessment is an essential ingredient of learning." The self-paced PLATO Learning program allows students to exercise more control over when they learn, what they learn, and how they learn. Dr. Holmes has noted that students stop labeling themselves as learners and take an active role in diagnosing and addressing their own skill gaps.

According to Kimberly Roan, a third year pre-service teacher at Albany State, "After being able to successfully use PLATO Instructional Solutions, I stayed on the computer for five straight hours. I fell in love with PLATO Learning courseware instantly. PLATO Learning gave me the option of starting where I wanted to start. It also encouraged me to think before I answered and guided me smoothly through each problem. When I missed a question, the software never looked at me funny or gave me a smart remark; it simply showed me the error and encouraged me to continue."

A learning partnership

The partnership between PLATO Learning and the colleges and universities participating in this HBCU Initiative represents a long-term commitment. PLATO Learning and HBCU view the partnership as a journey on which they share a common mission, combining their joint expertise for continuous improvement and accomplishment. "We know that as we teach, we will be taught," says Dr. Holmes. "We want the next generation of learners to be smart learners, so we are creating the smart teachers who will teach them."