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Case Study: Open Lab Time as a Strategy to Increase Female (and Male) Retention

Always looking for new ways to improve their female retention rates, El Camino College recently began opening their welding and electronics classes to students looking for more open lab time. Students are now able to use the classroom to work on their own assignments while other classes are in session. This has been beneficial to all students, especially female students, who often need more time to learn lab tools and techniques, particularly those in introductory courses.

The drive behind opening the lab times came from a survey of female students conducted by the CalWomenTech Project, which showed that 43% of female welding and electronics students thought that extra lab time would be helpful. As a group, female students come to classes with less hands-on experience than their male counterparts. Adding flexibility to the lab times also allowed students who were taking night classes, but had their schedules change due to work or family obligations, the ability to easily get time in the lab. So far both female and male students have regularly utilized the open lab policy.

When asked how the department put the policy into effect, welding instructor Lynn Fielding said the idea "was first discussed by the welding instructors and was thought to be a good idea. Next, the Dean of Industry and Technology was presented with the concept and it was discussed at a Division Council Meeting and thought to be beneficial to welding students." Instructors for both electronics and welding agree the benefits of the extra lab time are higher grades and increased retention.

Surveys of your female students are a great way to learn how you can adjust your program to support your female students, giving them their best chance to succeed.