

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

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Problems

Student Success



Student Success

STUDENT SUCCESS has become a much greater focus of higher education. More than ever, colleges are being measured by how well they retain and graduate students, especially those who are first generation or low income.

In this collection of *Chronicle* articles and expert advice we profile efforts that have made strides in serving those populations and others. Colleges featured here have beefed up—and been more creative about—academic advising, mentoring, and using data. One, Pierce College, has worked closely with faculty members to get them to think more about student outcomes in the classroom. Another, Arizona State, teaches parents of first-generation students how to support their kids during the college years. That program even awards a diploma for moms and dads who complete the course.

These examples offer the lessons, tips, and advice needed for college leaders and administrators to help more students earn their degrees.

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A 'Culture of Care'

How one university uses hard numbers and a human touch to make sure students' demographics don't determine their destiny

By AUDREY WILLIAMS JUNE

GREENSBORO, NC

STUDENTS' DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS often offer some of the strongest clues about whether they ultimately succeed or fail in college.

First-generation and low-income students, for example, are more likely to be academically unprepared and have spotty family support and limited financial resources — all obstacles on the path to earning a degree. About half of low-income students, as measured by those who received Pell Grants, graduate in six years, compared with a graduation rate of 65 percent for students who don't get that federal aid. And some minority students struggle with feelings of isolation at colleges where their numbers are few, which is one reason that the black-white achievement gap persists: About 22 percentage points separate the six-year graduation rates of black and white students who entered a four-year college in 2007, according to federal data.

As class disparities in the broader society have worsened and as increasing numbers of minority and first-generation students come to campus, the task of helping students from these vulnerable groups get to and through college has become central to the future of higher education. These demographic changes are already happening here at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, which has become one of the most diverse institutions in the state. Nearly 45 percent of Greensboro's undergraduate students are members of a minority group; roughly one out of every four students is African-American. The share of Greensboro students who are Pell Grant recipients has risen to 44 percent, from 32 percent a decade ago. And one-third of this year's freshman class are the first in their families to go to college.



LISSA GOTWALS FOR THE CHRONICLE

At the U. of North Carolina at Greensboro's School of Health and Human Sciences, students who are uncertain about what to major in can take a special class called "Redesign a Life You'll Love." Once they've made their own decisions about what they want to do, says Bill Johnson, the course's creator, "they're willing to stay on track."

The university has come a long way from its beginnings as a tiny women's college focused on "domestic science," business, and teaching, and one that accepted its first black students — two women — when forced to by a court order in the 1950s. Today Greensboro has 19,653 students (about 3,300 of them in graduate school) and has transformed itself into a doctoral university with a Carnegie classification of "higher research activity." It has also attracted notice from the U.S. Department of Education for its work with low-income students and from the Education Trust for being a "standout institution" that has achieved marked success in erasing the black-white achievement gap.

Officials at Greensboro credit a strategy of combining hard-core data analysis with an emphasis on the human touch. This approach hasn't fixed everything; in fact, some of Greensboro's goals have remained elusive as metrics have barely budged. Inevitably, some students will fail to make it through

to graduation, says Franklin D. Gilliam Jr., who became Greensboro's chancellor in 2015. But the institution is adamant that students' demographics should not dictate their destiny.

"We have to be vigilant," says Mr. Gilliam. "There can't be a pattern in who doesn't make it."

IT STARTED with a period of self-analysis. In 2009, Greensboro formed a campuswide committee to come up with a plan to increase first-to-second-year retention, which had hovered around 76 percent for the previous five years, and to boost four- and six-year graduation rates, which were at 32.2 percent and 56 percent respectively.

The group spent months poring over several years of student data to try to identify the factors that affected student retention. Administrators, faculty, staff, and students looked at retention rates by ethnicity and gender and among other groups, like first-generation

and honors-college students, as well as for freshmen with undeclared majors and students with unmet financial needs. They also analyzed the reasons students withdrew, to check for patterns there.

Greensboro identified four groups of students who were at particularly high risk, says Kimberly Sousa-Peoples, director of new-student transitions and first-year experience. They were students who were academically unprepared, who weren't taking enough classes to keep their financial aid, who were in some form of distress — such as those battling mental illness or grappling with family issues, or those who wanted to study nursing, one of Greensboro's most popular and competitive majors.

Later Greensboro turned to analyzing a host of specific markers to better determine whether a student was at risk of dropping out. Some of the variables are obvious indicators of academic preparation, like an incoming student's GPA, standardized-test scores, or where he or she went to high school.

Other variables reflect students' academic habits, like the number of college credits they bring with them to Greensboro, how many classes they miss during the first few weeks of the semester, and whether those who need tutoring have actually signed up for it.

Some data points are more subtle, like a student's distance from home — more than 150 miles can serve as a heads up that homesickness may derail his or her studies. Meal cards that are rarely swiped at breakfast could signal that a student is skipping early classes.

These data points — 80 in all — feed into the predictive modeling software Greensboro bought. First used in 2014, it assigns students to deciles based on how likely they are to stay enrolled. This classification allows Greensboro to focus on the students in the lowest deciles who are most at risk during their first year and beyond, says Bryan Terry, vice chan-

From the committee meetings came a new Students First Office, which serves as a first responder of sorts to any academic, social, or financial challenges a student may have. For instance, students who aren't taking enough credits to keep their financial aid are guided to the office, where staff members help them figure out how many courses they should take each semester to stay on track financially and graduate. The office, created in 2011, also provides academic advising and is the main resource for students who haven't selected a major.

The committee's work also resulted in new student-success software, which lets the faculty and staff flag students whose academic performance or general welfare raises concerns. The flags alert student-success staff members so they can follow up. In its first year of universitywide use, in 2011-12, about 15,000 flags were raised.

Hands-on student-success work is labor intensive, and so with limited resources at its disposal, Ms. Sousa-Peoples says Greensboro has made student success everyone's job. "Retention," she says, "isn't just one office's problem."

THAT HELP for students, triggered by the numbers, is all about the human touch, which Greensboro counts on faculty and staff members to provide. The university offers a two-hour voluntary training called "UNCG Cares," where faculty and staff members learn about the types of distress that affect students, how to recognize the signs, and how to guide students to the campus resources that can help them.

Participants get a "UNCG Cares" sticker to display in their offices — a clear signal that they're willing to help students in trouble. Since 2007, more than 1,200 people (about one-third of Greensboro's employees) have completed the training.

"That culture of care really separates us from the rest," Mr. Terry says. "We're much more *in loco parentis* than other places. We're intrusive and unapologetic about it."

During their training, faculty and staff members learn to look beyond data, and to pay attention to students' visual cues and body language. Justin Golding, a career coach in the Career Services Center, says the training has made him more attuned to students' signals of stress, like avoiding eye contact and giving curt answers to questions.

"Sometimes it's just good for them to talk with another person because that can help normalize the experience they're having," Mr. Golding says. "They'll find out they're not the only one feeling that way."

For Rod Wyatt, Greensboro's senior director of college-completion initiatives, staying abreast of potential roadblocks to graduation can be as simple as walking around campus "with your eyes and ears wide open," he says. Students have mentioned



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“We have to be vigilant. There can't be a pattern in who doesn't make it.”

cellor for enrollment management. Mr. Terry says during certain points in the academic year, his office reruns its predictive models weekly as new information about students comes in, all the while keeping an eye out for red flags. A request for a transcript or a failure to reapply for financial aid, for example, might call for some staff intervention.

"We're careful not to box people in. It's predictive modeling, not your destiny," Mr. Terry says. "But it works well enough for us to use it to go after the ones who really need help and may not ask or even know they can ask."

him that they're struggling in a course or worried about a family situation back home. "You step in when you have to," says Mr. Wyatt, who has worked at Greensboro since 1987 in various positions.

The intrusiveness behind Greensboro's retention and persistence efforts takes many forms. One of the most common is regular and, at times, repeated outreach to students by phone or email.

Student-success staff check in with students at critical junctures. They reach out to freshmen to help them figure out the best way to earn the 30 credits needed to become sophomores the follow-

ing year, including suggesting summer courses to catch up. When students hit 60 credits, staff members ask if the students have picked a major. "And if not," says Mr. Terry, "we counsel them through that." For students with 90 credits, staff members check in with deans to make sure the courses those students need to graduate will be offered.

Students who are slow to register for classes are gently prodded by staff, via email, to offer help or more information.

The assistance even extends to students who withdraw from the university. Student-success



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A lot of students “just pick a major because they don’t know what they want to do,” says Bill Johnson, an instructor at the U. of North Carolina at Greensboro. In his classes, students develop more-intentional life plans.

staff members counsel them on how to position themselves to return and graduate from Greensboro. “We had one student with 109 credits whose car broke down so she couldn’t get to school,” Mr. Terry says. “So we talked to her about some online classes she could take so she could stay on track.”

AS GREENSBORO learned from its data analysis, a key indicator of the need for help is when students are undecided about a major. That’s where people like Bill Johnson, student-success navigator for the School of Health and Human Sciences, come in. Mr. Johnson created two courses for students who are undecided or who have chosen a major but remain unsure about it. He calls himself the “Dream Dean.” His course, “What Could I Do With My Life?,” pushes students to think beyond just picking a major and to focus instead on their larger purpose in life. In a

follow-up course he helps students figure out the path they can take to live out that purpose. These courses are particularly pertinent for students interested in nursing, many of whom decide to transfer elsewhere if they don’t get admitted to the program. The goal is to provide them with other options at Greensboro.

One student who explored her options was Jasmine Kendrick. Before she enrolled at Greensboro, she had wanted to become a pediatrician, but she abandoned that plan.

“When I came here, I had no clue what I wanted to do,” says Ms. Kendrick, a native of Fayetteville, N.C. She settled on kinesiology, at the suggestion of her mother, a physical-therapy technician. But she wasn’t sure that was right for her either.

Then, as a freshman, she heard Mr. Johnson describe his courses’ effectiveness at a student orientation for students with health and human-sciences majors. She signed up for his first course; it seemed

like a way to determine if kinesiology was really right for her.

The first semester brought cathartic classroom discussions about the angst surrounding choosing a major. She completed projects that forced her to outline her dreams for various areas of her life. Ms. Kendrick enrolled in Mr. Johnson’s follow-up course, “Redesign a Life You’ll Love,” though she admits she was skeptical for much of her freshman year that either course would actually deliver the promised results.

Eventually, Ms. Kendrick began to embrace the idea that college offered a chance for her to pursue her own interests, not just those dictated to her by others. She admitted to herself that taking all the science courses required for health-focused majors would make her miserable. And she even began to see entrepreneurship as a possibility.

In the end, Ms. Kendrick says, she considered seven different majors before finding what she’s stuck with: psychology and African-American and African-diaspora studies.

The exploration that Mr. Johnson fostered has worked in Ms. Kendrick’s favor, and others’. The retention rate for students who have taken Mr. Johnson’s first course has typically been higher than that for Greensboro students over all. About 85 percent of students in the course in the fall of 2014 returned in the fall of 2015, according to data supplied by Mr. Johnson. That beats the 78-percent retention rate for first-year students overall. The retention rate for students who have taken both of his one-credit courses during their first year of college, is 90.6 percent.

Students who took his first course, dating back to 2008, had a five-year graduation rate that was the same or above the university’s six-year graduation rate, Mr. Johnson says.

“A lot of students just grind their way through high school and then just pick a major because they don’t know what they want to do,” says Mr. Johnson. “Once they get clear on that and pick something they want to do, they’re willing to stay on track.”

GREENSBORO HAS received widespread praise for its efforts. Black students there have graduated at the same rate or higher than white students for more than a decade. Last year the U.S. Department of Education identified the university, in a study, as one of the small number of four-year public institutions that excel in enrolling and graduating Pell Grant students. About half of the Pell Grant recipients at Greensboro graduate in six years, just three percentage points below the graduation rate of its non-Pell students, the study said.

These successes are central to Greensboro’s sense of itself. Its job ads and website emphasize the diversity of its student body and faculty and its commitment to student success.

But Greensboro’s plans to improve retention have

yet to produce clear victories. In 2009, the year that its committee started deliberating, the retention rate was 76 percent. For the most part, it has remained right around that level. The business of increasing retention rates is complicated, especially at institutions that see sharp changes in the number of minority, low-income, and first-generation students on campus.

Even when an institution commits to reaching out to struggling students individually, says Mr. Terry, sometimes “nothing you do makes a difference, and that’s hard to take.”

The university’s newly created Office of Retention Initiatives set a five-year goal of a 78 percent or higher retention rate for students who entered in 2016. The plan is to increase the rate by at least one percentage point each year after until it reaches 80 percent, four percentage points up from where it is now. The institution expects to reach a six-year graduation rate of 60 percent by 2027. Its most recent six-year graduation rate, for students who entered in 2011, was 50 percent.

The reasons for its success in closing the achievement gap are also difficult to parse. Its student-success programs are probably helping. But Mr. Gilliam, the chancellor, also believes that the makeup of the university’s student body is an additional tool that helps with student persistence.

“When you’re black and walking around campus,

“We’re careful not to box people in. It’s predictive modeling, not your destiny.”

you see other black students here,” says Mr. Gilliam, who was formerly dean of the Luskin School of Public Affairs at the **University of California at Los Angeles**. “I think the critical mass we have contributes to a sense of well-being among the African-American students.”

The institution is looking forward. It needs to find money to expand its student-success efforts, and it hopes to join the ranks of colleges that get federal funding for a program that prepares first-generation college students or underrepresented minorities to pursue a Ph.D. However, the needs of Greensboro’s students — and the methods used to try to meet them — are likely to keep changing.

“The work is never done, and it’s a moving target, especially as your student population changes,” says Ms. Sousa-Peoples, who was a member of the 2009 committee. “There’s no silver bullet.” ■

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Getting Faculty to Embrace Student Data

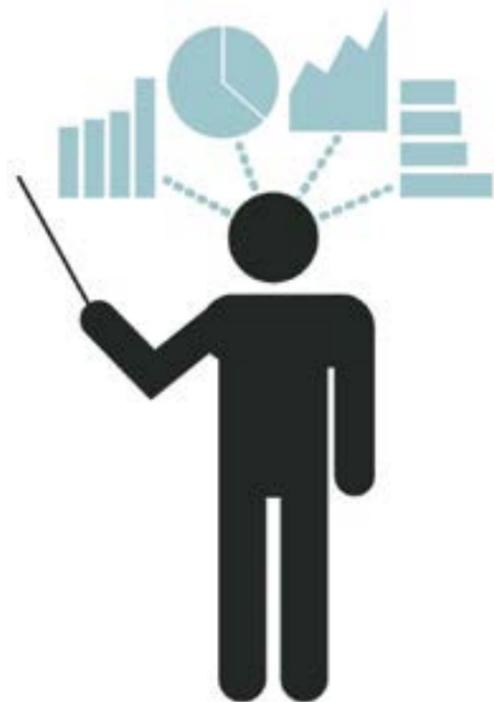
Pierce College has improved graduation rates by breaking down student success course by course

By BEN GOSE

WHEN Pierce College, in Washington State, redesigned its precollege-level math courses in 2013, administrators asked students what had helped them succeed. The response was surprising: What mattered most, the students said, was which instructor you were assigned.

Tom Broxson, the community college's dean of natural sciences and math, looked at the data and found that the students were right: In one Algebra 2 section, only 30 percent of students earned a 2.0 or better, the required minimum for moving on to college-level math. In another section of Algebra 2 taught by a different instructor, 95 percent of the students earned a 2.0 or better. Administrators found similar discrepancies in many other courses.

"It was a crapshoot for the students," Mr. Broxson says. "If they didn't know who to take, their chances for success could vary dramatically."



Carly Haddon (right), the creator of Pierce College's student-data dashboards, talks with Rajesh Lal, a math professor, during a training session for faculty members.

MATTHEW RYAN WILLIAMS FOR THE CHRONICLE

It was also a problem for the college, which serves more than 20,000 students at two campuses about 30 minutes south of Seattle and on a local military base, as well as online. In 2012, Pierce had signed on with Achieving the Dream a national effort to improve college-completion rates. The grading variances were thwarting the college's progress toward those goals.

The frustration over the grading discrepancies set in motion an experiment that led to significant-

ly higher college-completion rates at Pierce, and is earning the college national attention.

For the past three years, the college's institutional-research office has created data dashboards that show course-completion rates for the classes of every Pierce instructor.

The dashboards allow instructors to see and compare, among other things, how black and Hispanic students are doing in their classes, how women are doing, and how first-generation college stu-

dents and Pell Grant recipients are doing. And each instructor can look at those same data for every other course, and every other instructor, at the college.

“You can look at anybody who has taught at Pierce in the last 10 years,” Mr. Broxson says. “It’s like an Autotrader menu.”

An instructor who spends a few minutes looking at the dashboards might find, for example, that when he and his colleague across the hall each teach

A troubling or promising data point is merely an indicator — you have to dig into it to find its meaning.

the same course, African-American men are 20 percent more likely to successfully complete the course taught by his colleague.

Offering such information is only the first step. Getting often-skeptical faculty members to act on it is next. Pierce has been able to convince professors of its value and to start conversations about how to use it to improve teaching.

“Teaching has always been somewhat of a solitary role — you have your class and your students, and everything that happens in your class may seem normal,” says Matthew Campbell, vice president of learning and student success at Pierce’s Puyallup campus. “This is a way to go in, and with a few clicks, instantly have useful data that tells you something about what’s going on in your own class and across the institution.”

SINCE INTRODUCING the completion dashboard, the college has added dozens of others, including a panel that shows the faculty how students perform in a subsequent course following the initial course — a way to identify the instructors who are helping students learn and acquire skills as opposed to those who may simply be inflating grades.

Lee West, an assistant professor of chemistry, says he and his colleagues in the chemistry department dig into the dashboards — and one another’s grading practices — at staff meetings.

“Amazingly, people don’t get upset — we have a civilized conversation about it,” Mr. West says. “If somebody is giving abnormally high or low grades, that isn’t necessarily a problem. We can look at how the students perform in the subsequent class.”

Mr. West says that while full-time chemistry instructors grade in a tight range, the grading prac-

tices of adjunct faculty vary wildly, and their grades tend to be higher. One possible explanation for the higher grades: Adjunct faculty members are subject to more student-satisfaction assessments than full-time faculty are. Adjuncts, who make up nearly two-thirds of the roughly 380 instructors at Pierce, have less job security, and student feedback is one factor in determining which adjuncts are retained.

The dashboards provide evidence of the grading disparity, Mr. West says, which makes it easier to initiate a difficult conversation.

“We had a feeling that was happening, but it was just a gut feeling,” he says. “We would have felt really nervous talking about it in the absence of quantitative data.”

The dashboards can encourage experimentation in the classroom by allowing instructors to see the impact of new approaches. Carly Haddon, an analyst in Pierce’s institutional-research office and the creator of the dashboards, jokes that they have expanded Pierce’s institutional-research staff from three to more than 300 (more than 200 instructors and another 130 administrators now have access to the dashboards).

“The administration has been looking at this data for years,” Ms. Haddon says. “You can’t expect change unless you give the data to the people who can make that change.”

MELONIE RASMUSSEN, a math professor, was surprised to see in the dashboards that large numbers of her students were relatively low-income, and were working and raising families. The dashboards don’t provide information linked to individual students, but Ms. Rasmussen began surveying students to learn more about what they were juggling: Do you work? How many credits are you taking? Can you study at night? What’s a reasonable turnaround time for homework?

One student replied that she typically worked on her homework from 10:30 p.m. to 2 a.m., after her oldest child went to bed. Ms. Rasmussen took action. Instead of requiring students to turn in assignments within a day or two — her custom before the dashboards — she gave them more time and typically included a weekend.

“I gained more sympathy for what students need to be successful here,” she says. “I was literally making them choose between working, feeding their kids, and spending time with their kids. There’s no need to have homework done every day when dealing with this population. I can wait for the weekend.”

That kind of adjustment is helping more students succeed. In 2010, fewer than 19 percent of Pierce students earned an associate degree or certificate within three years. By 2016, that number had risen to 31.4 percent. The college hopes to hit 45 percent by 2020.

In February, Pierce was one of two community

Tracking Completion Rates

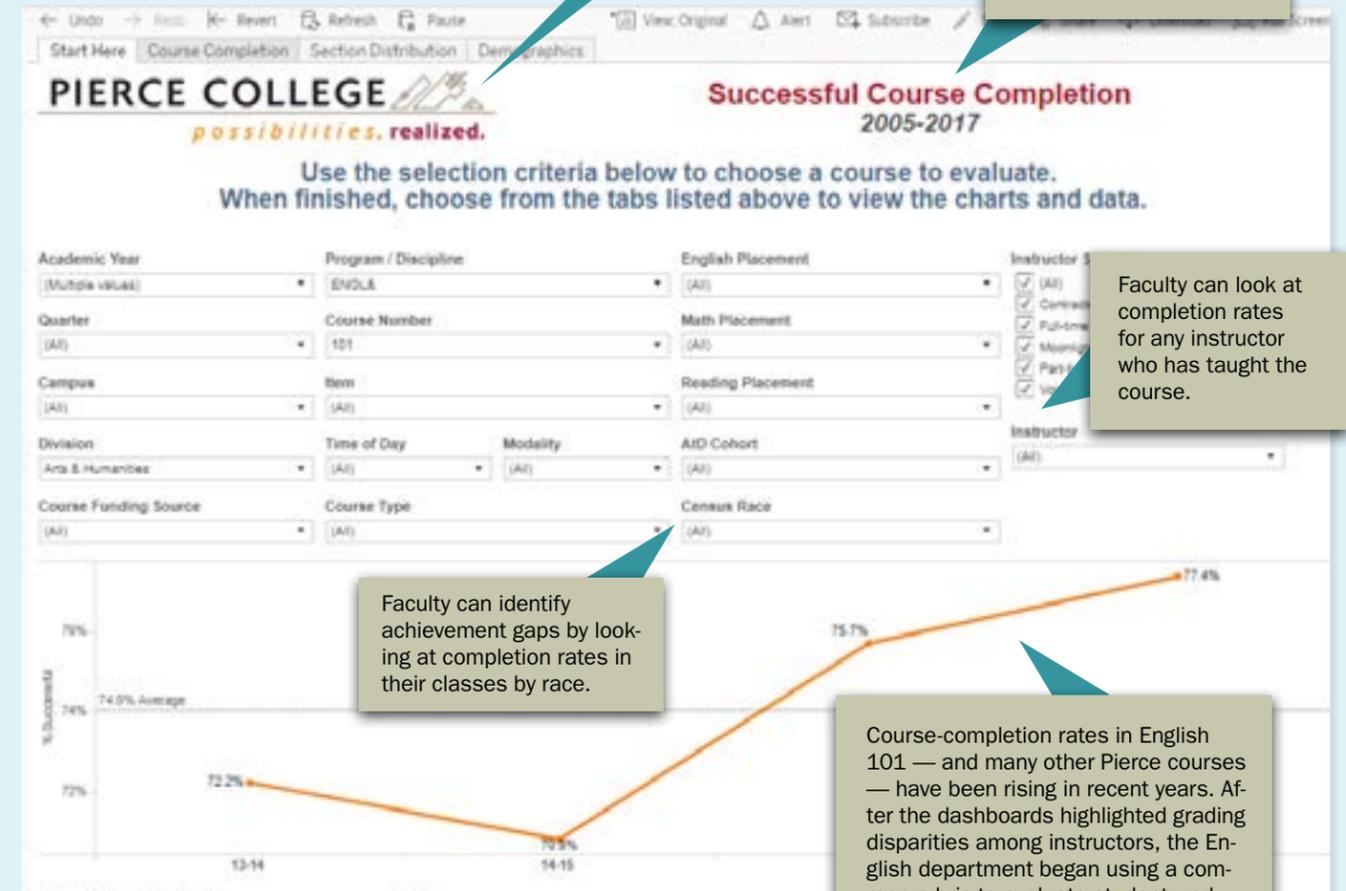
Pierce College, a community college in Washington State, has created more than two dozen digital dashboards that summarize data about student performance, retention, and other topics.

One of the reports most viewed by faculty members online is the “Successful Course Completion” dashboard, which examines how well students are doing in a course or individual classes.

This dashboard lists average course-completion rates for all instructors of English 101, a course required for all students, from 2013 to 2017.

To view the dashboards, Pierce staff members must attend a training session on how to use the program and put the numbers in context. Roughly 350 Pierce employees, including full-time faculty, adjuncts, and administrators, have gone through the training.

Pierce defines completion as a grade of 2.0 or higher or a P for passing.



Faculty can identify achievement gaps by looking at completion rates in their classes by race.

Course-completion rates in English 101 — and many other Pierce courses — have been rising in recent years. After the dashboards highlighted grading disparities among instructors, the English department began using a common rubric to evaluate student work, which has raised completion rates for all students and narrowed achievement gaps between white students and students of color.

Faculty can look at completion rates for any instructor who has taught the course.

colleges in the country (the other was Miami Dade College) to receive the Leah Meyer Austin Award, handed out annually by Achieving the Dream to colleges that are making changes that lead to measurable improvement in student outcomes.

Michele Johnson, Pierce's chancellor, says the dashboards have been a "game changer" for the college as it works toward 2020 goals to improve graduation rates and reduce racial achievement gaps.

"We're getting there," she says, "but we have a long way to go."

More than 95 percent of full-time instructors now have access to the dashboards, according to Ms. Haddon. And while there was plenty of early suspicion about whether administrators would use the dashboards in a punitive way, most of those concerns have faded, faculty members say.

Now most of the raised eyebrows occur when administrators and institutional-research staff go on the road — at conferences or in presentations to other colleges — to explain how the dashboards work.

When they describe how the dashboards show, by name, the teaching outcomes of every instructor at the college, what follows is "a big gasp that sucks all the oxygen out of the room," Mr. Campbell says.

How do you do it, administrators at other colleges sometimes ask.

"There's a feeling among other colleges that,

'We couldn't turn on that switch,'" Mr. Campbell says. "But we didn't just flip the switch either. It took years of relationship building, and trust building."

Ms. JOHNSON, who's been at Pierce for 40 years, including 13 as chancellor, says Pierce began using data to improve outcomes for students in 2010, after she and the college's board attended the Governance Institute for Student Success, a program offered by the Association of Community College Trustees that emphasizes data-informed governance and decision making.

"We'd always been about access and an open door, but we could see that we weren't getting the level of success that we wanted," Ms. Johnson says.

The college joined Achieving the Dream in 2012 and began taking an even deeper look at its data. Mr. Broxson, the dean, says he addressed a crowd of 600 people that year, primarily Pierce instructors, and detailed outcomes for underrepresented minority students and first-generation college students that were so poor that they suggested the college was actually exacerbating gaps between the haves and have-nots.

Instructors were disturbed to hear that the college was failing many of its students, but most

didn't see how they fit personally into the goal of turning things around, Mr. Broxson says. They continued to assume that in their own classes, the students who deserved to succeed were doing so.

"It kept me up at night that a lot of faculty couldn't see themselves in the work," Mr. Broxson says. "They couldn't make that connection."

The breakthrough came in 2014, when the institutional-research department shared an early version of the dashboards with the math department as it set out to redesign precollege math. The dashboards showed that while some instructors were helping nearly all students succeed, others were escorting most of their students to failure.

Instructors in other departments heard about the dashboards and wanted a look, especially as a college-wide review of courses and pedagogy began in 2015.

"Before there was frankly a conscious decision about this, people wanted to see the dashboard, and boom, out it came," Ms. Johnson says.

Administrators emphasized from the beginning that the dashboards were a tool for improvement, not a way to punish lagging instructors.

And they acknowledged that the data were only a starting point. Erik Gimness, Pierce's director of institutional research, likens the dashboards to metal detectors: A troubling or promising data point is merely an indicator — you have to dig into it to find its meaning.

"The course-level data is that beeping noise you hear on the beach," Mr. Broxson says. "Then you have to dig in and do a qualitative assessment — is this a bottle cap or a gold coin?"

Before instructors or administrators get access to the dashboards, they must go through an hour-long training with Ms. Haddon. She wears a "Data to the People" shirt to help lighten the mood and make the trainings fun, but the college has a seri-

ous goal: It wants to make sure instructors know how to accurately interpret the data, and understand that the information should not be shared publicly.

The college's commitment to the dashboards does come at a financial cost. Ms. Johnson says the college had cut back in other areas to put more money toward the data effort, including trimming lightly used Saturday-morning hours at libraries, and recently spent \$100,000 on software to make it easier to produce the dashboards.

The college is also tying some professional development to projects that use the dashboards.

"You can't expect change unless you give the data to the people who can make that change."

One program offers a \$2,000 increase in salary if instructors use student data in a yearlong classroom-oriented project.

The incentives in the professional-development program have increased salaries at Pierce by a total of more than \$300,000 since 2012. Ms. Johnson says the investment is worth it, if it encourages instructors to not only look at the data but to take action.

"If all we have is data, and we're not asking what it means, what's the point?" Ms. Johnson says. "And if the analysis doesn't lead to doing something, what good is it?" ■

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How 2 Professors Used Data to Improve Their Courses

When Pierce College started to give its instructors more data on how their students were doing, it changed how some faculty members teach and improved their understanding of their students' experience.

Tom Broxson, the Washington State community college's dean of natural sciences and math, teaches an online geography course. He saw in the data dashboards that the proportion of students passing his course had dropped from his long-term average, about 80 percent, to just 65 percent in the most recent two years. He looked at his gradebook and found that more students were dropping out in the first week, and then he brainstormed with other faculty members about a possible cause.

That's when he discovered that the higher dropout rate coincided with a change in the learning-management

system used by the college. Students weren't familiar with the new system, he theorized, and some were getting overwhelmed in the first week. He changed the display so that students could see only two weeks of assignments at one time, which helped the students adjust and lowered the dropout rate.

Paul Gerhardt, a Pierce business professor who chairs the department, learned from the dashboards that African-American students were far less likely than other students to successfully complete his course on human relations. In 2015-16, he looked into the research, and decided that personalized attention might make a difference.

Mr. Gerhardt, who received a \$2,000 raise as an incentive to use the dashboard data in a classroom research project, began calling on African-American students more often, and address-

ing them by name. He also tried to get all students more engaged by using a teaching method that focuses on facilitating small-group discussions about a problem or idea. Those efforts led to nearly 81 percent of African-American students completing the class with a 2.0 or better, compared with a completion rate of just 60 percent in previous quarters.

This year, through a second program that will net him another \$2,500 increase in salary, he will conduct an in-depth study of what helps African-American men succeed in the classroom. He hopes to create a documentary featuring students who have graduated from college and put it on YouTube.

"The dashboards are telling me that I'm doing a lot of things right," Mr. Gerhardt says. "Hopefully I can take that to the next level." —Ben Gose

How 3 Colleges Improved Graduation Rates

By DAN BAUMAN



At College of the Ozarks, where students can work campus jobs in lieu of paying tuition, officials use a personal approach to aid retention.

COLLEGE OF THE OZARKS

As provost Ralph C. Wilcox likes to tell it, the University of South Florida's effort to raise graduation rates on its main campus started years before advocacy organizations, television personalities, or the Obama administration made the issue a popular talking point. No one "Eureka!" policy rocketed thousands of new students to commencement; rather, dozens of efforts influenced the graduation rate in their own small ways.

From 2011 to 2015, the large university increased its six-year graduation rate for first-time college students by nearly 17 percentage points, the largest increase for a public institution in the country. In 2011, just over half of the nearly 4,000 undergraduates who entered as first-time freshmen six years earlier had earned their degrees. By 2015, the graduation rate had risen to 68.4 percent.

The improvement, which resulted from a campuswide effort involving the president on down, was possible only because so many constituencies were enthusiastic over a long period of time, says Mr. Wilcox, who is also executive vice president of the South Florida system and of its main campus, in Tampa.

At South Florida, as at other institutions around the country that raised their graduation rates significantly over four years (see table on Page 50), greater attention to the retention of first-time undergraduates helped spur the change, college officials say. In 2004, USF failed to retain nearly 20 percent of that year's freshman class, a circumstance that Mr. Wilcox deemed "inexcusable."

"That was irresponsible. It didn't reflect well on our institution. It didn't serve our students well," Mr. Wilcox says. By 2015, the retention rate had risen to 88 percent.

The university fought the battle on all fronts. Students who do not meet academic-aptitude requirements for the main campus are now referred to associate-degree-granting public colleges. If their grades improve enough by the end of sophomore year, those students can apply and be admitted to South Florida, Mr. Wilcox says.

Class schedules and office hours were designed to promote one-on-one interactions between students and faculty members. Officials found the ability for students to follow up with professors after class significantly improved student success. And more money was put into counseling services to serve growing mental-health needs on campus as officials recognized that illnesses like anxiety and depression were preventing some students from keeping pace with their peers.

Two nonprofit colleges that succeeded in raising their graduation rates by 20 or more percentage points over a four-year period used tactics similar to South Florida's, along with other ideas that fit with their much smaller size and individual missions. Indeed, at some point in the past decade, South Florida, Newman University, and College of Ozarks have been able to raise their retention rates by around 10 percentage points from 2004 figures. The methods used to raise such rates are as varied as the institutions themselves.

At Newman, a Roman Catholic institution in Wichita, Kan., change started after administrators realized how few students they were retaining and graduating. In 2011, just over one in four of the 181 first-time undergraduates who enrolled six years earlier had earned degrees there. With that feedback in mind, Newman officials set out to drastically improve student success and performance, says Rosemary Niedens, associate vice president for academic affairs.

Rather than zero in on one student demographic, the university specified any and all groups for

Colleges With the Greatest Improvements in 6-Year Graduation Rates, 2011-15

Of the 20 four-year public institutions whose graduation rates within 150 percent of normal time climbed the most, six raised their rates from below 50 percent to 50 percent or above. Seven of the 20 private nonprofit colleges with the largest percentage-point increases did the same.

		2005 subcohort	2009 subcohort	2011 graduation rate	2015 graduation rate	Percentage-point increase
4-year public institutions						
1.	U. of South Florida	3,926	3,752	51.7%	68.4%	16.7
2.	California State U.-Monterey Bay	540	944	37.8%	53.4%	15.6
3.	U. of Maine at Presque Isle	181	155	30.4%	45.8%	15.4
4.	Louisiana State U. at Alexandria	149	146	12.8%	27.4%	14.6
5.	Florida International U.	3,967	2,946	43.4%	57.8%	14.4
6.	Pennsylvania State U.-New Kensington	148	148	40.5%	54.1%	13.5
7.	U. of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College	823	1,333	19.1%	32.3%	13.3
8.	California State U. at Long Beach	4,241	3,473	54.0%	67.0%	13.0
9.	California State Polytechnic U. at Pomona	3,089	2,728	50.3%	62.9%	12.5
10.	California State U. at Fullerton	3,816	3,842	50.1%	61.9%	11.9
11.	Indiana U.-Purdue U. at Indianapolis	2,211	2,624	32.9%	44.7%	11.8
12.	Colorado Mesa U.	828	963	28.4%	39.9%	11.5
13.	U. of Montana Western	190	156	32.6%	43.6%	11.0
14.	U. of Massachusetts at Amherst	4,397	4,106	67.4%	78.3%	10.9
15.	Peru State College	213	227	25.8%	36.6%	10.7
16.	U. of North Alabama	982	1,064	27.4%	37.8%	10.4
17.	San Jose State U.	2,439	2,621	46.4%	56.8%	10.4
18.	California State U.-Dominguez Hills	705	1,069	24.4%	34.7%	10.3
19.	State U. of New York Maritime College	247	355	46.6%	56.6%	10.1
20.	Central Connecticut State U.	1,333	1,277	47.3%	57.3%	10.1
		2005 subcohort	2009 subcohort	2011 graduation rate	2015 graduation rate	Percentage-point increase
4-year private nonprofit institutions						
1.	Newman U.	181	174	28.2%	50.0%	21.8
2.	College of the Ozarks	239	244	53.6%	73.4%	19.8
3.	Otis College of Art and Design	171	171	52.0%	71.3%	19.3
4.	McPherson College	107	136	45.8%	64.7%	18.9
5.	Cornerstone U.	313	315	44.4%	61.3%	16.9
6.	Talladega College	135	240	20.0%	36.7%	16.7
7.	Madonna U.	185	178	45.4%	61.2%	15.8
8.	Marietta College	387	386	51.2%	66.3%	15.2
9.	Davenport U.	180	374	25.0%	39.8%	14.8
10.	Illinois College	256	224	56.6%	71.4%	14.8
11.	Seton Hill U.	333	301	44.7%	59.5%	14.7
12.	Mount Saint Mary's U. (Calif.)	177	210	51.4%	65.7%	14.3
13.	Immaculata U.	296	198	55.4%	69.7%	14.3
14.	U. of St. Thomas (Tex.)	289	284	43.9%	58.1%	14.2
15.	Dillard U.	490	321	24.5%	38.3%	13.8
16.	Lancaster Bible College	101	115	58.4%	72.2%	13.8
17.	Avila U.	154	118	41.6%	55.1%	13.5
18.	Bethel College (Ind.)	310	286	50.6%	63.6%	13.0
19.	Holy Cross College	150	121	12.7%	25.6%	13.0
20.	Eastern Nazarene College	186	173	53.2%	65.9%	12.7
		2005 subcohort	2009 subcohort	2011 graduation rate	2015 graduation rate	Percentage-point increase
4-year for-profit institutions						
1.	Grantham U.	278	183	19.4%	42.1%	22.7
2.	Monroe College (N.Y.)	203	423	69.5%	90.3%	20.8
3.	Daniel Webster College	192	167	43.2%	48.5%	5.3
4.	U. of Phoenix-Maryland	244	111	15.2%	19.8%	4.7
5.	Colorado Technical U. Online	787	136	9.5%	14.0%	4.4
6.	Academy of Art U.	510	854	34.5%	38.9%	4.4
7.	LIM College	188	242	52.1%	55.8%	3.7
8.	Grand Canyon U.	169	223	30.8%	33.6%	2.9
9.	Art Institute of Ft. Lauderdale	178	241	39.9%	42.7%	2.9
10.	Illinois Institute of Art at Chicago	468	168	30.8%	33.3%	2.6

Note: Graduation rates are based on students' completion of their degrees within 150 percent of the normal time, which is usually six years for a bachelor's degree. The 2015 subcohort of first-time, full-time undergraduates who were seeking bachelor's or equivalent degrees when they entered college in the fall of 2009 were considered to have graduated within 150 percent of the expected time if they earned a degree by August 31, 2015. The 2011 subcohort, who entered college in the fall of 2005, were considered to have completed in that time frame if they earned a degree by August 31, 2011. Students who were no longer enrolled because of death or total disability, service in the armed forces or a federal foreign-aid service, or service in an official church mission were excluded from the initial subcohorts. Colleges with fewer than 100 students in either subcohort were excluded from the table. Percentages and percentage points were rounded, but colleges were ranked before rounding.

SOURCE: Chronicle analysis of U.S. Department of Education data

improvement. It hired a consultant to provide advice on retention strategies. Learning communities were established to help build community and relationships among students, most of whom commute to the campus. A robust intervention plan was put into action early if a student exhibited warning signs observed in previous dropouts or transfers. The university added more tutors. And normally unsung employees got the spotlight for their efforts to build a welcoming community with students, because "it takes everybody," Ms. Niedens says.

Within four years, the university had raised its graduation rate from 28.2 percent to 50 percent, an increase of nearly 22 percentage points by 2015.

Taking a more personal approach also worked well for College of the Ozarks, a religious institution that was successful in rapidly improving its graduation rate, says Eric W. Bolger, vice president for academic affairs and dean of the college. The Missouri institution waives tuition payments for all full-time students in exchange for work and volunteer service, but easing financial pressure was not enough to keep students progressing steadily toward graduation. In 2011 just over half of the first-time, full-time freshmen who entered six years earlier had earned degrees. Mr. Bolger says community members understood that more had to be done to improve student success.

The college formed a working group of staff and faculty members to coordinate efforts. It decided to focus on retention. For instance, in the past an official would have explained student-success strategies (how to study, tutoring resources, what plagiarism is) in rapid succession over the course of two days at freshman orientation. Now faculty members provide such guidance in the classroom. The college has also beefed up its counseling resources. And, in many cases, the university has helped students pay for books, medical care, even dental care.

"We've really put more of an emphasis on that relational, one-on-one dynamic," Mr. Bolger says. "You know, making sure that faculty tell my office if the student seems like they are not functioning well, not coming to class, not doing their work. Then they need to come to my office, and we need to deal with it immediately."

OFFICIALS AT all three colleges say they plan to keep pushing for higher graduation and retention figures.

South Florida officials hope to reach and surpass a 70-percent six-year graduation rate soon, and to achieve at least a 90-percent retention rate as well. Running parallel to that, Mr. Wilcox says, the university will continue its effort to raise the four-year graduation rate for first-time undergraduates as well, which in 2015 stood at 42.7 percent.

The push is part of South Florida's broader march to become a "pre-eminent" national research

At South Florida, as at other institutions around the country that raised their graduation rates significantly over four years, greater attention to the retention of first-time undergraduates helped spur the change.

university, with the goal of induction into the elite Association of American Universities.

At College of the Ozarks, sights are set to vigorously direct resources and energy to second-year undergraduates. Mr. Bolger, the dean, envisions a community-based approach, with the creation of learning groups within residence halls.

"That second year has been identified as a real struggle for students, where the excitement of being a new student has kind of disappeared but they're not yet into their major enough to really have that community," he says.

The college hopes that such strategies will foster a sense of belonging and excitement, says Mr. Bolger, and help students feel like "not just a number among many, but part of something smaller, where they can actually get to know people." ■

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Building Remedial Ed's Support Structure

It's the help students get outside the classroom that often gets them through a course

By KATHERINE MANGAN

LAST FALL, a student sat across the desk from Anyssa Manuel and told her he was falling behind in his remedial-math class and was worried that he might lose his football scholarship. When she asked how things were going outside of class, he confided that his mother was struggling with a drug problem and that he had been preoccupied with trying to help her. He felt comfortable opening up to her because she was a fellow student who had overcome tough times herself. Ms. Manuel, who had dropped out of high school and had a baby in her teens, is a successful student now at Phoenix College, part of the Maricopa County Community College District, in Arizona.

The paid peer-mentorship program in which she participates is part of a growing number of support services nationwide that are aimed at reducing the alarming dropout rates among students who start out in remedial courses.

Nearly two-thirds of students entering community college place into at least one remedial class in math or English, according to Columbia University's Community College Research Center. But only one in five students who are referred to such classes goes on to pass the relevant entry-level college course. Fewer make it to graduation.

Even more so than in the general population of two-year colleges, remedial courses are filled with first-generation, low-income, and older students whose complicated lives often derail their college goals.



DAVID WALLACE FOR THE CHRONICLE

Anyssa Manuel, a sophomore at Phoenix College, in Arizona, who overcame tough times herself, mentors classmates to keep them on track to graduation.

The focus of many statewide reform efforts has rested squarely on the courses themselves. Should they be compressed into shorter terms, as they are on a growing number of campuses? Offered alongside credit-bearing classes, as they are statewide in Tennessee? Or made optional, as they are in Florida?

What receives far less attention — and should, according to many experts — are the support programs that serve as scaffolding to the fragile structures that students and their advisers are trying to build.

Such support includes peer mentoring, mandatory tutoring, and lessons in financial literacy and time management, as well as more tangible benefits, such as access to food pantries, textbook subsidies, and bus passes.

“You can have the best faculty and the best curriculum and the best tutoring in the world, but if students can't come to class because a relative is sick or they have to work to put food on the table, then it's all for naught,” says Michael A. Baston, vice president for student affairs at LaGuardia Community College, part of the City University of New York.

At LaGuardia, his office oversees the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, which has significantly increased the graduation rate among participating students. It involves intensive advising and tutoring, priority in course registration, free textbooks, and bus passes.

Much of its success, Mr. Baston says, is based on the life-planning skills that help students identify ways to avoid dropping out in response to a short-term crisis, which is often the default reaction.

Extracurricular interventions are a big part of what makes up the umbrella of developmental education — a field that too often is seen as simply a gantlet of remedial courses that students pay for, don't get credit for, and stand between them and graduation.

Combining brush-up courses in basic math and English with lessons in topics like financial and time management makes sense, says Hunter R. Boylan, director of the National Center for Developmental Education.

Often, when students drop out, it's because they didn't budget for minor emergencies, says Mr. Boy-

lan, who is a professor of higher education at Appalachian State University. For students with little or no health insurance, for example, a medical problem can quickly deplete a bank account.

What passes as minor headaches for middle-class students can mean the end of college for others.

“When someone’s car breaks down and they have to spend \$375 for a new fuel pump, they may have to decide between paying tuition and fixing their car,” Mr. Boylan says.

What passes as minor headaches for middle-class students can mean the end of college for others.

Personalized financial-planning tips might avert a situation in which someone blows off a \$50 traffic ticket and ends up with a suspended license, missing several

days of work, and facing hundreds of dollars in fines.

“Our weakest and poorest citizens don’t always make good life decisions,” says Mr. Boylan. “They put up with illness until it gets very expensive to treat. They’re in a relationship and don’t know how to manage it so it doesn’t interfere with their studies. We’re not doing a very good job with intrusive life-skills counseling.”

On the other hand, he says, empathy is important. “We all want to blame it on the students, but we don’t have any idea the gritty lives they face. It’s easy for us middle-class guys to say, ‘Just pay the parking ticket.’”

MANY COLLEGES include lessons in life planning in student-success courses or post tips on their web pages.

Grand Rapids Community College, for instance, posted an online exercise to help students determine whether they really had the time to devote to a three-hour-a-week online history course. Students did that by charting out the hours they spend on work, family, and college activities, and calculating the number of hours they would have to devote to homework (usually three to four hours a week for every credit hour the course is worth.)

For students piecing together work and caring for children or other relatives, setting realistic goals and carving out enough time to study and hit the tutoring center are crucial, advisers point out.

But no matter how many support programs colleges offer, they won’t work if students ignore them, which too often is the case, says Robin Ozz, director of developmental education and innovation at Phoenix College. “Intrusive” advising can help — reaching out to students instead of waiting for them to come in — but for many colleges, that is an unrealistic goal. Case loads of 1,000 students per adviser are not uncommon in community colleges.

“There are never enough advisers to meet with students to say, ‘Why are you dropping the class?’” says Ms. Ozz, who is president of the National Association for Developmental Education. “It’s always the push and pull of resources versus best practices.”

Assigning students like Ms. Manuel as peer mentors can help. These students, who earn \$10 an hour, hold office hours and attend classes, where they model good behavior like taking careful notes and participating in class discussions.

The mentors hand out business cards and share their stories with other students, offering tips for avoiding procrastination. They help classmates make study note cards and urge them to “stop before they drop” by spelling out specifically how dropping a course can delay graduation.

The peer mentors receive an initial 12-hour intensive training program, plus another four hours in dealing with privacy-protection issues. Biweekly training sessions are held after that.

In the case of the student worried about his mother, Ms. Manuel worked with his instructor to let him redo some of the course material, and she urged him to tell his mother that he loved her, but that it was important for him to focus on his college work.

That’s one example, she says, of how mentors help students identify boundaries that help keep family needs from encroaching too much into their studies.

BEYOND HUMAN intervention, technology is playing an increasing role in pinpointing problems students are having early on, while there is still time to salvage the semester.

Learning-analytics software tracks students’ online participation and quiz results. The data it uncovers can be used to create personalized pathways that help students stay on track and to alert professors and advisers if they veer off.

Those interventions are crucial in states like Florida, where concerns over the high cost and low success rates of remedial courses prompted the state to pass a law in 2013 that makes such courses optional for most recent high-school graduates. Enrollment in those courses dropped, but the needs of underprepared students didn’t.

Indian River State College, an open-access institution that offers primarily two-year degrees, saw a need for more-intensive advising to help students who might feel lost jumping right into college-level classes.

The college is doing it through a combination of technology and a beefed-up tutoring center. Students take diagnostic tests in gateway classes at the start of the semester and are given remediation road maps. They’re referred to tutors, who introduce themselves in class. Software tracks whether and how students follow up.

Software also tracks how well students do on quizzes that are embedded in lectures, as well as how consistently they are taking online notes.

In addition, a revamped student-success course, required of all incoming students, teaches time management, financial literacy, learning styles, and other factors that affect a student’s motivation to persist.

“We’re reaching out to students in a way that may seem a little more intrusive but feels more like we care about them and want them to be successful,” says Paul R. O’Brien, vice president for institutional technology at Indian River.

A student who is struggling to pay for a class because her car battery died may be eligible for money from a special fund as long as she’s performing well in class.

Since the array of interventions was introduced, success rates in entry-level courses have increased from about 73 percent to 80 percent, college officials say.

Mike Rose, a research professor of education and information studies at the University of California at Los Angeles, would like to see intervention strat-

egies continue beyond a student’s first year.

When someone graduates from a two-year program in which she has received intensive support, “there should be some kind of mechanism to address the fact that another big transitional change is about to happen. Every juncture in the pipeline is a huge potential rupture point,” Mr. Rose says.

“I come from a poor family and did mediocre until my senior year in high school, when an English teacher turned my life around,” he says. “Then I went to a small college as a probationary student and stumbled. If you come from a background like mine, you need multiple points of mentorship and intervention and guidance. You don’t just take a shot of Vitamin B12 and be done with it.”

One such intervention, for him, was a professor who encouraged him to participate in an “English Society” club where students would meet over beers, or at the professor’s home, to discuss writing and literature.

5 Tactics to Help Remedial Students

ONE-STOP SHOPS

Programs like Single Stop, which is offered at 22 two-year colleges, help students find solutions to their child-care, food, transportation, health care, and legal issues. Trained advisers connect students — who may be commuting long distances, caring for sick relatives, or living in shelters — with community services they may not be aware of or know how to access. The Community College of Philadelphia reports that in Single Stop’s first three years there, the program had helped more than 1,900 students get health-care coverage, 2,500 file taxes, and nearly 500 receive legal help with immigration, housing, and other problems.

FINANCIAL PLANNING

Even when they don’t cause students to drop out, financial worries can interfere with coursework. Colleges are finding that it’s cost-effective to spend time helping students budget, create emergency funds, and explore and apply for scholarships. Elgin Community College, in Illinois, offers a financial-literacy program that includes individualized loan counseling, group workshops, and an interactive live game in which players simulate their financial futures after graduation to see if they can make it to the end of the month before their money runs out.

TIME MANAGEMENT

Students who piece together part-time jobs and care for family members often need help setting realistic goals to make sure they set realistic priorities and carve out time to study. This is particularly true for first-generation students, whose sporadic attendance often causes their grades to drop and confidence to plummet. Bossier Parish Community College, in Louisiana, offers online tips on planning ahead, emphasizing studying, and limiting distractions.

STUDENT MENTORS

Peer mentors provide classmates with the attention that adjunct professors and counselors, stretched thin by workloads, can’t always offer struggling community-college students. Peers are also often able to broach nonacademic subjects in ways that seem relatable and nonthreatening. Century College, in Minnesota, is among the institutions offering support through Brother 2 Brother, which includes a student-success program designed to improve the educational experience and graduation rates of black and Hispanic men. Activities include weekly academic support, college-success workshops, and career discussion.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Students take classes and get outside support together, creating a sense of community and greater curricular coherence. The courses often have a common interdisciplinary theme. Northwest Vista College, part of the Alamo Colleges District, in Texas, offers linked courses in sociology and government that examine government’s response to solving social problems. Some studies have shown that students who participate in learning communities are more likely to remain in college and graduate; other studies find that the benefits don’t extend beyond the first semester.

— KATHERINE MANGAN

He says he's also a fan of learning communities, in which a group of freshmen take two or more classes together as a cohort. When done well, these programs result in better grades and a more supportive environment for students.

Bunker Hill Community College, in Boston, offers learning community clusters in which faculty members have planned their courses together around common themes, like environmental politics and exploring the immigrant experience. Remedial and college-level courses are taught during the same semester, so students can finish faster.

College officials say students who participate in the learning clusters are more likely to finish their remedial coursework and persist to the next semester.

Research on learning communities has shown mixed results, though, with some studies finding that the benefits don't necessarily extend much beyond the first semester. To be effective, the pro-

grams need faculty members working together to create a cohesive set of courses.

That kind of planning can be challenging. So can getting a group of students with busy lives on a common schedule.

The benefits, though, can be worth it. Students who get to know one another through learning communities tend to become more engaged both in the classroom and in campus activities, advocates say.

And for students who are the first in their families to attend college, or who, like most community-college students, have been away from the classroom for years, that sense of belonging can make the difference in whether they stay or drop out.

"Many of these students are strangers in a strange land," says Mr. Rose. "And we need to do whatever we can to help them." ■

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How CUNY Community Colleges Make Intensive Student Support Work

THE ROAD from high-school dropout to college honors student took lots of twists and turns for Sherman Allen. The 34-year-old resident of Queens, N.Y., credits a wraparound program of support with inspiring him on that path, which he hopes will lead to law school.

Mr. Allen found out about City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs while combing through websites for a way he could move on from his job installing commercial security systems.

"I wanted a job where I could use my brain and didn't have to sweat the rest of my life," he says. "But I didn't know how I was going to pay for it."

ASAP promised to cover any tuition that wasn't met by financial aid, and to provide textbooks vouchers and unlimited transit passes. He'd get a dedicated adviser to see him through to graduation. In return, Mr. Allen agreed to attend full time, complete any remedial courses in the first year, and meet regularly with advisers and tutors.

Sold, he enrolled at LaGuardia Community College, one of nine CUNY campuses that offers ASAP to some 15,000 students. His adviser encouraged him to take an honors English course, which he aced.

"My son is 17, and he wants to go to college," says Mr. Allen, who is the first in his family to go to col-

lege. "I want to lead by example."

The ASAP program, which has been replicated by three community colleges in Ohio and is to be adopted by others, in California and New York, this fall, is considered one of the nation's most successful examples of intensive support, much of it nonacademic, for underprepared students. It's expensive — over three years, CUNY spent about \$16,300 more per ASAP student than it did on those in the general population, according to a 2015 study by MDRC, a nonprofit education- and social-policy research group.

Still, it's cost-effective, proponents say, because so many more students graduate. At three CUNY colleges, the program nearly doubled the three-year graduation rate for students who started out in remedial classes, according to the study.

The intensive advising is a key feature, says Michael A. Baston, vice president for student affairs at LaGuardia.

A counselor, for example, would notice that a student had missed several classes and would ask if anything was wrong. If the student said she had to work because there was no food in the house, the counselor might direct her to a food pantry and suggest that someone in the career-services office find her a campus job to cut down on the commute.

"It's very easy to be aspirational and to say, 'You know, if you stay continuously enrolled over your lifetime, you may earn \$1 million more,'" says Mr.



MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE CHRONICLE

"It's very easy ... to say, 'You know, if you stay continuously enrolled over your lifetime, you may earn \$1 million more,' says Michael Baston (left), vice president for student affairs at LaGuardia Community College. 'But if you're hungry, that million dollars seems a million years away.'"

Baston. "But if you're hungry, that million dollars seems a million years away."

CUNY markets ASAP to students on social media, in subway stations, movie theaters, and more traditionally, in high-school guidance offices, where its array of supports appeals to those who find the idea of college overwhelming.

Arlene Lind, a 20-year-old student who signed on with the program at LaGuardia, says that when she was spending all of her time helping her sister, who was struggling in another community college, her adviser reached out to her sister's counselor with advice. That freed Ms. Lind to concentrate on her own studies.

"Without ASAP," she says, "I would have been emotionally drained and lost."

Skeptics question whether such interventions amount to too much hand-holding. What happens, they ask, when a student transfers to a four-year college, or begins work, and has to be much more independent?

Mr. Baston says that the intensity of interventions diminishes as students become acclimated to college, and that the purpose of the program is to get them to stand on their own.

"The goal of these services," he says, "is to get the students to walk away from you every day, not to run to you."
— KATHERINE MANGAN



College 101 for Parents

Helping moms and dads help their first-generation students succeed

By KELLY FIELD

PHOENIX

THE FIRST REACTION Denny Gutierrez had when his mom said he had to join her for eight weeks of college-prep classes this past fall was “but I have soccer games Wednesday nights.”

“I thought it was going to be a waste of time,” the high-school freshman recalled at his graduation from Arizona State University’s American Dream Academy, in December. “I never thought my mother could understand me.”

But after the first class, Mr. Gutierrez and his mother were already communicating better, he said. They stopped arguing over his low grades and started working together to improve them.

These days, his mom, Gisela Avalos, sits with him when he reads and does homework. She said she listens more than she used to. And she understands now the steps that it will take to get him through high school and into college.

“Our dream has been for him to go to college,” said Ms. Avalos, who moved to the United States from Mexico in 1994 and owns a window-tinting business. If he makes it through, he will be the first in his family to earn a degree.



DAVID WALLACE FOR THE CHRONICLE

Denny Gutierrez, a student at Maryvale High School, in Phoenix, started off thinking the American Dream Academy “was going to be a waste of time.” Now, after receiving his graduation certificate, he says the program “should be required so everyone can have this connection with their parent.”

Ms. Avalos is among the more than 35,000 parents who have graduated from ASU’s American Dream Academy over the past decade. The program serves two purposes: to give parents of first-generation students like Mr. Gutierrez the information and confidence they need to help their children succeed in school, and to sell Arizona State to communities that may be less familiar with the university.

Research shows that family engagement is critical to student success in school and college. Students who have involved, supportive parents are more motivated, less likely to miss class, and more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college.

Yet surveys also show that many parents of first-generation students aren’t sure what it takes to be effective partners and advocates for their children.

Most college-access programs focus on the student, educating the child as a way to compensate for gaps in the parents’ knowledge. The programs may offer a workshop or two on applying to college, or on

applying for financial aid, but they rarely involve parents in substantive ways, said William G. Tierney, a University of Southern California professor who has studied parent engagement.

“Programs frequently give lip service to working with parents, but with limited budgets the vast majority have to focus on direct services to students,” Mr. Tierney said.

That is slowly starting to change, as more colleges and nonprofit groups offer multiweek seminars, savings accounts, and scholarships aimed at getting more parents of first-generation students involved in their children’s education.

THE American Dream Academy was in 74 elementary and secondary schools in Phoenix and Tucson in 2016. All the schools that offer the program are Title I institutions, meaning that at least 40 percent of their students are low income. More than 85 percent

The program tries to get parents to see themselves as partners with their child's school, not just beneficiaries of it.

of the parent participants speak only Spanish. For many of the parents who complete the course, it will be their first time graduating from anything.

That was the case for Roberto Esqueda Hernández and his wife, Maria López de Esqueda, who graduated from the program with Ms. Avalos and her son this winter. The couple grew up in the Mexican countryside, and left school after the fourth grade to work on their families' ranches. Mr. Hernández, who spoke at the graduation ceremony, said that before he enrolled, he assumed he and his wife wouldn't be able to afford college for their children.

"To be honest, I always thought that the middle class had no chance of a higher education," he told the audience at Maryvale High School, "that the American dream was to slave like a mule in this country, trying to learn a trade."

The classes, he continued, taught him "that if some of us couldn't or didn't do it, our children can."

The early evidence from programs like the American Dream Academy is encouraging. Parents who attend multiweek seminars like ASU's show marked

improvements in their awareness of how to help their children succeed in school, as well as how to plan for sending them to college and communicate with teachers and administrators. Even more encouraging: Their children are enrolling in college at much higher rates than are their peers.

It's harder to say if such efforts are having an effect on college-graduation rates. Most of the parent-oriented programs don't track students through college, and those that do haven't been around long enough to claim many graduates.

Surveys do show that a majority of low-income and minority parents want their kids to attend college. But such students remain underrepresented in higher education, especially at four-year institutions.

In part, that's because parents of first-generation students tend to overestimate how much college costs, and assume, like Mr. Hernández did, that it is financially impossible. At the same time, they're often uncertain how to advocate for their kids or support their schooling.

Alejandro Perilla, director of ASU's Center for Community Development and Civil Rights, says that nearly all the parents who take part in the academy "are 100 percent committed to their children's education." When he asks parents, "Who is your

child's first and most important teacher?" they almost invariably say they are. But when he asks, "Do you know how to get your child to college?" most will confess they don't.

"They'll say, 'I don't know what to do with my children,'" he said. "They seem lost."

The American Dream Academy, which offers its two-hour morning and evening classes in both Spanish and English, aims to bridge that gap. It teaches parents how to navigate the educational system, demystifying standards, assessments, and educational tracks, and to negotiate the often intimidating process of applying for college and student aid. It offers tips on communicating with teachers, counselors, and principals, and shows parents how to create a supportive home learning environment and build their child's self-esteem.

In the process, the program tries to get parents to see themselves as partners with their child's school, rather than beneficiaries — or victims — of it, and to get them to plan for their children's future.

That can be a significant shift for the program's mostly Hispanic immigrants, many of whom expect the school to educate their children and can't think too far beyond the next rent payment, said Mr. Perilla.

"This is not a community that plans a lot," he said. "We're changing the conversation from, I trust you, school, to do everything for my child, to, Let's begin to work together."

The academy grew out of the Parent Institute for Quality Education, a nonprofit that started offering nine-week parent seminars in San Diego 30 years ago. The program, which gets funds from California State University, now operates in 36 out of 58 counties in California and has been copied by 11 states.

But the first place to which it was exported was Arizona State University, in 2006. Even today the academy remains the only university-run replica, and the only one that actively promotes a particular college.

The educational materials are branded with the ASU logo, and "there is an expectation that your child will consider ASU," Mr. Perilla said.

At the high-school graduation ceremony, students receive mock Arizona State student-ID cards, and parents are given a certificate granting their children conditional admission to the university (assuming they meet academic requirements). Parent graduates also get two nails: one on which to hang their certificate, and one to leave empty, awaiting their child's college diploma.

The awards are symbolic and a bit hokey. Still, Mr. Perilla said, they send an important message to the immigrant community that the academy serves: "We want your kid."

IN A 2012 national survey of outreach programs, two-thirds of respondents said their programs had a parent component. Most common were college-awareness workshops and financial-aid counseling, which were offered

4 Parent-Education Programs and Their Lessons for Colleges

	How it works	Outcomes	Advice
PARENT INSTITUTE FOR QUALITY EDUCATION	PIQE was started in San Diego nearly 30 years ago and is the model for the American Dream Academy at Arizona State University. It offers free nine-week seminars in 16 languages to low-income parents of high-school students. It also offers courses to parents in early-childhood development, financial literacy, STEM education, civic engagement, and leadership.	To date, more than 600,000 parents have completed the program. A 2013 survey of parents who had participated in it showed that 90 percent of the respondents' children had graduated from high school, while 70 percent of those students had enrolled in college following graduation.	Parent graduates are the best recruiters; call participants the day before each class to urge them to attend; don't lecture to parents — dialogue and discussion are better; make your curriculum culturally relevant and current, reflecting the latest educational standards.
INVERSANT	Inversant, a Boston-based program, provides matched savings accounts and monthly seminars for low-income parents. It also provides scholarships to five local institutions through agreements with those colleges. Inversant raises the money for the matching and scholarships from corporations, foundations, and private donors.	In its first eight years, 1,000 parents opened savings accounts and saved about \$1 million. Three hundred and fifty students enrolled in college, and 65 graduated. The program's one-year college-persistence rate is 89 percent, compared with 66 percent for Boston Public Schools; its four-year graduation rate is 73 percent, compared with 35 percent for Boston Public Schools.	Go to where the parents are — hold events in their communities, at locations that can be reached with public transportation; offer incentives tied to seminar attendance; practice positive reinforcement, offering bonuses for frequent contributions to savings, even if they're small.
LEAGUE OF UNITED LATIN AMERICAN CITIZENS PARENT/CHILD SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM	A joint program run by Lulac Council No. 2 and Alamo Colleges, in Texas, it provides financial incentives to both parents and their children to get a college education. The Alamo College Foundation annually provides \$1,000 scholarships to 25 parents to enroll in one of the five Alamo institutions. An endowment funded by the league provides two-year, tuition-and-fee scholarships to the children of parents who complete their academic goals.	Parents maintain an average 3.13 GPA in their first year, with an average fall-to-fall persistence rate of 96 percent. Of the 513 parents who have received a scholarship, 231 have earned a credential — a 45-percent graduation rate. The three-year graduation rate for all Alamo College students seeking certificates and associate degrees is 16.5 percent.	Look for partners among community leaders, government agencies, and local school districts, but be selective about the partners you choose; clearly define what you need from your partner, and get it in writing; to improve retention, vet scholarship candidates fully, including through interviews.
FAMILY DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE	Part of the University of Southern California's Neighborhood Academic Initiative, a seven-year precollege enrichment program for low-income students from neighborhoods around the university, the institute offers 16 Saturday seminars for parents. Parents elect a leadership governance board, attend field trips, and raise money for the program.	Ninety-nine percent of students who participate in the initiative go to college, and 75 percent of them graduate. Forty-one percent of participants have gone to USC.	Mean what you say and say what you mean. The community has a long memory, particularly if promises are made and then rescinded. Create a leadership body of parents to act as ombudsmen between the administrators of the programming and the community. Always come from a perspective of strength. There may be needs in the community, but your parents bring many strengths to the table.

by more than half of those programs. A little over a third of programs offered campus visits and tours.

But parent participation was mandatory in only 20 percent of the programs that included them, according to the survey, by the Educational Policy Institute.

“Most programs start with the student, and then reach out to the parent,” said Deborah Santiago, vice president for policy at Excelencia in Education, which promotes education policies and institutional practices that support Latino academic achievement. She worries that the programs’ frequent focus on financial aid “sends the message to parents that their primary role is to pay for college,” not to prepare for it.

Researchers have a few theories about why programs haven’t made priorities of parents, but most of them come down to resources and this: Parents of first-generation students are busy. Students are a captive audience, but their parents often work unpredictable hours or hold several jobs, making it hard for them to attend a weekly workshop. Even those with regular routines may struggle to find child care during the sessions.

Recognizing that challenge, several of the more successful programs have created incentives to re-

The program tries to get parents to see themselves as partners with their child’s school, rather than beneficiaries of it.

ward parental participation. The Family Development Institute, part of the University of Southern California’s college-prep program for low-income kids in the neighborhoods around the university, requires parents to attend at least 80 percent of its seminars for their children to be eligible for a full ride. Alamo Colleges, in Texas, which offers \$1,000 scholarships to parents of young children through a partnership with the League of United Latin American Citizens, takes that approach a step further: making the child’s scholarship conditional on the parent’s completing his or her credential.

Helen Vera, director of San Antonio College’s Services for Women and Non-Traditional Students, said the child scholarship helps the five Alamo Colleges retain their parent students, who are striving toward undergraduate degrees or certificates.

“It keeps them going,” she said. “They know, ‘I’m doing this for my child.’”

Inversant, a Boston-based nonprofit that provides

matched savings accounts and monthly seminars for savers, has experimented with a variety of incentives to encourage parent involvement, including raffles at its seminars and bonuses for regular savers. Parents don’t have to save a lot to receive the bonus; they just have to be consistent. Inversant raises the money for the matching and bonuses from corporate and private donors.

“The savings is merely a reinforcement of commitment,” said Charles F. Desmond, chief executive of Inversant. “It shows how committed I am to this long-term expectation that my kid will go to college.”

Yet even with these efforts, many programs struggle to attract and retain parents. Fewer than half of the parent recipients of Alamo Colleges’ scholarships over the past 20 years have earned their college credential and secured a two-year scholarship for their child (some of the parents are still in college). And Bob Hildreth, Inversant’s founder, said his group, which has opened 1,000 savings accounts in eight years, has “dealt with recruitment issues and disappointments” from the start.

“I thought by offering to double their money, people would be running across the street to us,” he said. “It just isn’t so.”

One thing that has helped: college-sponsored scholarships, or as Mr. Hildreth puts it, “the big win.” Not everyone will hit the jackpot, but the prospect of a full ride to one of five Boston-area colleges serves as a potent recruitment tool, and encourages families to stick with the savings and the seminars.

The American Dream Academy doesn’t offer parents any financial incentives, but it does offer modest bonuses — \$40 or so — to instructors who graduate at least 80 percent of their participants. The Parent Institute for Quality Education provides instructors with a \$600 stipend upfront, but docks it if the instructors lose more than 30 percent of their participants (they rarely do).

Both programs also depend on the power of personal testimony and peer pressure, using graduates as recruiters, and calling parents before each class to remind them to attend. PIQE’s completion rate is above 90 percent, and the Academy’s hovers around 80 percent.

In its first semester, in the fall of 2006, the Academy graduated 251 parents from two schools; this past fall, it graduated 1,268 parents from 32 elementary, middle, and high schools. It also graduated 476 high-schoolers this past fall.

BACK AT Maryvale High School in December, Marcela Lopez, assistant director for the Academy and a “proud Sun Devil” herself, took photos of the graduates. She showed them how to make the pitchfork sign, ring finger to thumb, then led them in a chant. “Now, *cinco veces*, ASU,” she said.



DAVID WALLACE FOR THE CHRONICLE

Roberto Esqueda Hernández receives his graduation certificate from Arizona State U’s American Dream Academy at Maryvale High School, in Phoenix: The classes, he said at the ceremony, taught him “that if some of us couldn’t or didn’t do it, our children can.”

“ASU, ASU, ASU, ASU, ASU,” the students cheered, hands raised.

In the years from 2007 to 2014, 80 percent of the children of graduates who were seniors in high school went on to college — twice the rate of Arizona students generally. A quarter of the students went to ASU, while half enrolled in colleges in the Maricopa Community College District. The remainder went to technical programs, the military, and out-of-state colleges.

Denny Gutierrez, who wants to study science and engineering, said he’s considering Arizona State, Louisiana State University, or the University of Oregon.

In his graduation speech, he said that the class

“should be required so everyone can have this connection with their parents.”

Mr. Hernández and Ms. Esqueda, who never even made it to middle school, said they wanted to give their youngest daughter, Alondra, the opportunities they couldn’t give their older children.

“We didn’t know how to help them,” Ms. Esqueda said, in an interview after the ceremony. “They didn’t go to college.”

“College seems more real now,” added Mr. Hernández. “I never thought it would be possible, but now I think differently.” ■

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To Help Latinas Get to College, Strengthen the Mother-Daughter Bond

IN THE early '90s, when Con Mi Madre got its start, a Texas demographer reported that a Latina girl born in the state had less than a 1 percent chance of going to college.

Twenty-five years later, those odds have improved for some: Over half of Latinas who graduate from high school in central Texas will enroll in college in the state.

But Latinas still trail their white peers when it comes to college attendance, and only 15 percent of Latina high-school students in central Texas will earn a college degree.

Those are the statistics that Con Mi Madre, an

For Con Mi Madre, a college-prep group in Texas, the “parent cannot be secondary.”

Austin-based college-prep program that works with mother-daughter pairs, is trying to change, duo by duo.

The program's name means “With My Mother,” and it aims to strengthen the mother-daughter bond that has been shown to increase a girl's chances of going to college. Starting in sixth grade, girls and their mothers volunteer on community-service projects together, tour colleges together, and attend Saturday seminars where they learn strategies for maintaining good grades, dealing with peer pressure, developing healthy self-esteem, and setting goals. Each conference begins with a bonding activity like yoga or jewelry making.

While most college-prep programs focus on academics and paying for college, Con Mi Madre puts equal emphasis on socioemotional growth and interpersonal communication. That's in part because Latina adolescents have the highest rates of depression and suicidal thoughts of all female teenagers, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“In order for these girls to succeed, they need for their moms to support them,” said Teresa Granillo, the program's executive director. “And a lot of the moms want something better for their girls, but they don't know what it takes.”

The program is also trying to change cultural

attitudes about girls and college. In the past, Latino boys were encouraged to go to college, while girls were expected to stay home and learn to cook and take care of the children. That's no longer the norm, “but we do still encounter some of that,” Ms. Granillo said.

For some of the mother-daughter pairs, their first meeting with Con Mi Madre will be the first time they've discussed the possibility of college.

Con Mi Madre grew out of the Hispanic Mother-Daughter program, a community-based program created by the Austin Junior League, in Texas, in 1992. In 2008, when the program got too big for the Junior League to sponsor, it became its own nonprofit, and changed its name. Today the program serves more than 750 students in six Austin-area districts and has plans to expand beyond the city.

More than 80 percent of the mothers speak only Spanish, and the program celebrates Latino culture throughout, in “*Soy Latina*” (I am Latina) conferences, where students sing Selena songs and dance Flamenco, and in nutrition classes that offer healthier versions of traditional foods.

The program requires a big commitment: Parents have to sign a contract that they will participate fully with their child, and girls have to attend 80 percent of the bimonthly meetings at their schools. If they miss that target, they are put on participation probation and given six months to prove their commitment to the program.

But statistics suggest it is worth the effort. Girls who complete the program have a 260 percent better chance of attending college than do their peers. For every 100 students who finish the program, 100 will graduate high school, 77 will go on to college, and 54 will earn a college degree.

There are ripple effects, too. Ms. Granillo says parents will often recruit siblings and cousins into the program.

Ms. Granillo says Con Mi Madre has considered licensing its curriculum, but now it's leaning toward creating chapters, in part to ensure that the program maintains its cultural component.

Her advice for nonprofit groups and colleges that want to copy Con Mi Madre's approach is simple: “Don't treat parents like they're the vehicle to get the student to the program.”

“You have to make sure parents feel that they're part of the process, that they have skin in the game, and that their opinions matter,” she said. “The parent cannot be secondary.” — KELLY FIELD

Let Parents Be Parents

IDON'T REMEMBER MUCH about college orientation. But I remember arriving there.

It was a weekday, which meant taking time off from my summer job to make the short drive to campus. As my Jeep rattled to a stop, I looked around at a sea of late-model minivans and SUVs. Whole families were chattering and unloading luggage, toting overnight bags to the shuttle buses that would ferry us all to the student center and an overnight stay in a dorm.

I settled into a seat, looking around at my future classmates sandwiched between their moms and dads. Eavesdropping on conversations about classes and roommates and the merits of double-majoring, I was overcome with a single, bewildered thought: What on *earth* are all of these adults doing here?

My parents are loving, supportive people. They were enthusiastic about the whole going-to-college thing, even though they'd never done it themselves, and they sent me off with all the blessings and good will a kid could want.

And still, it never occurred to them — or to me — that they ought to be *involved* in college.

They had full lives and demanding jobs and a whole additional teenager still at home. And now, thanks to me, they had university bills to pay. Asking them to help manage the logistics of my new life would have been insane.

Colleges expect too much of parents, first-generation and otherwise. Educational institutions' instincts are to educate, to engage, to command interest and attention.

And while this is wonderful in the classroom or the research lab, it is unhelpful when applied to the mechanics of college life. Especially at the public institutions charged with serving a large percentage of low-income and first-generation students, the enrollment experience is littered with dense instructions on how to pay bills; long presentations on how to register for parking; downloadable guides with step-by-step instructions for logging into the clunky portal for Residence Life!™ (which is, of course, different from the clunky portal for class registration).

First-generation parents don't need more instruction on the college process. Colleges need to require less of it.

My bank's online-payment system does not include a webinar or an orientation session; it just works. My car is infinitely more complicated than my campus parking pass, but I figured out how to operate the car without paging through the manual. It was designed well.

Academic bureaucracy and decentralized governance make the picayune hurdles of campus life seem inevitable. But we can put our shoulders to the wheel when the incentives are right: fund-raising websites tend to be quite sleek. Nobody asks donors to go through a

five-part tutorial before they can key in a credit-card number.

We ought to apply that same zeal for simplicity to all of the functional pieces of campus life. There's virtue in making coursework a challenge; there is no defense for making class registration a crucible. Drawing a firm distinction between the educational mission and all of the administrative hurdles to get there is key to removing barriers for first-generation students and families.

Consider language. We expect college students to read at a college level, to tackle challenging syntax and glean meaning from richly layered text, dense with allusion and idiom. And that's a fine expectation — for the classroom. It is a disastrous expectation when applied to a list of meal-plan options.

Most news organizations aim for prose at a middle-school level. Marketing firms (and fund-raising offices) aim even lower. That's not because they assume people are stupid, but because ease and accessibility are important when serving a diverse audience.

People have a wide range of education levels and limited time to devote to instruction manuals. We make better use of that time — and communicate a warmer sense of hospitality — when we make our processes easier.

It's all well and good to proclaim, “The University is firmly committed to accessibility” (19th-grade level), but so much better if “We work hard to make college affordable” (fourth-grade). The language we use in policy papers is not the language for speaking to parents.

This may sound like small potatoes, but it adds up. I attend financial-aid nights across my state every year, watching as overworked parents sit in cold high-school cafeterias, straining at the complexities of direct and indirect costs, net-price calculators, grants and subsidized loans, debt projections, and repayment plans. Meanwhile, the reps at for-profit schools arrive with cheerful promises and a sign-on-the-dotted line ease.

That's what we're up against. The places that entice large numbers of first-generation students are the places that ask little of their parents; that speak in plain terms; that recognize the value of targeted marketing and well-designed user experience to ease the process of enrollment.

To make life easier for first-generation parents — all parents, in fact — let them keep the role they have. Preach the importance of college, and celebrate the value of what their kids are doing. But don't expect parents to become expert advisers on higher education.

Offering care and encouragement as your child enters a new world is a herculean task. It ought to be enough. ■

Eric Johnson works for the Office of Scholarships and Student Aid at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

COMMENTARY

ERIC JOHNSON



Building Latino Male Achievement

One university hopes to narrow the performance gap by providing mentors for Latino undergraduates, who in turn mentor schoolchildren

By LEE GARDNER

AUSTIN, TEX.

MIDDLE SCHOOL-AGE boys aren't known for their emotional candor. Boys of color, even less so.

So when Enrique Aguayo asks a group of eighth graders if they are nervous about entering high school, he gets only a couple of nods, and one acknowledgment.

"I'm worried about not passing," admits Hipolito, a student at Consuelo Mendez Middle School. "I can handle basic math, but algebra — uh-uh."

"You think you got it bad. I got geometry," Alberto chimes in.

The boys are more comfortable dissing Enrique, a graduate student in college administration at the University of Texas at Austin. "Your layups are trash," one boy says. "You work out with calculators," says another.

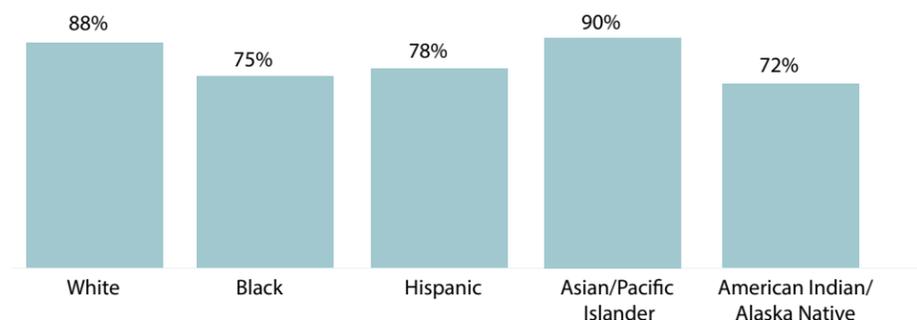


ILANA PANICH-LINSMAN FOR THE CHRONICLE

Enrique Aguayo counsels a student at Martin Middle School, in Austin. Mr. Aguayo, a graduate student at the U. of Texas at Austin, works for Project MALES, which stands for Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success. In the program, undergraduate- and graduate-school mentors try to guide Latino boys to college.

High-School Graduation Rates, by Race and Ethnicity, 2015

More than three quarters of Hispanics who began ninth grade at a public high school in 2011-12 graduated within four years. That rate has been increasing, but it's still 10 percentage points behind the rate for white students.



SOURCE: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

Welcome to Project MALES, a mentoring program at Austin that is part of a small but growing effort to get more Latino males into and through college. The program, which pairs undergraduates with middle- and high-school students and graduate students with undergrads, has sent more than 50 mentors into Austin public schools this year. Over pizza and pickup basketball, the student mentors offer lessons in leadership and college preparation.

The push to graduate more Latino men comes

Latinos lag behind Latinas, who now earn more than 60 percent of all associate and bachelor's degrees, and almost two-thirds of master's degrees, awarded to Hispanics.

as Hispanics are finishing high school and starting college at record rates. Over the past two decades, the share of Hispanic 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in college has gone from 21 percent to 37 percent, and the number of associate and bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanics has more than tripled, according to the U.S. Education Department.

But Hispanics continue to trail their white peers when it comes to college enrollment and completion. While more than half of white 25- to 29-year-olds now hold at least an associate degree, only just over a quarter of Hispanics in that age range do. And Latinos lag behind Latinas, who now earn more than 60 percent of all associate and bachelor's degrees, and almost two-thirds of master's degrees, awarded to Hispanics.

Those gaps have been attributed to a variety of factors both economic and cultural. Compared with white students, Latinos are more likely to attend impoverished schools with inexperienced teachers and high leadership turnover. They are more likely to live in poverty, and less likely to have a parent who attended college.

Hispanic boys, meanwhile, are often socialized in ways that lead them into the work force instead of college. A culture of "machismo" can discourage young Latinos from seeking help when they struggle academically, while *familismo* — valuing close family ties — can encourage them to work to provide for their families.

That's an "honorable decision," says Victor B. Sáenz, one of the founders of Project MALES, but one with profound implications for Latino families and the U.S. economy at large. Hispanics are the nation's largest minority group, expected to make up 29 percent of the nation's population by 2060, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Already, 18 percent of the nation's population, and almost one in every four elementary-school students, is Hispanic.

If these students don't graduate from college in higher numbers than the current crop of young Latinos, there won't be enough educated workers to fill the high-skilled jobs left vacant by retiring baby boomers. In forgoing college, young Latino men may be consigning themselves to a "permanent underclass," Mr. Sáenz, an associate professor of higher education, says.

Project MALES is working to prevent that scenario. By providing middle- and high-schoolers with role models who may be missing in their schools and neighborhoods, its mentoring program aims to create a college-going culture among young Latinos.

There's still not much concrete evidence of the program's effectiveness, but early signs are encouraging. In its first seven years, Project MALES has reduced chronic absenteeism in the schools it serves and raised college aspirations among its participants. Undergraduate mentors say the program gave them a sense of community and influenced their decision to pursue graduate school.

More-concrete data could come next year, through an agreement that is giving the program access to the Austin school district's student-tracking system.

WHEN MR. Sáenz and Luis Ponjuan published their seminal article, "The Vanishing Latino Male in Higher Education," in 2008, there weren't many researchers studying Latino males. While colleges were working to close the achievement gap between black men and women, the divide between Latinos and Latinas remained "a silent crisis," Mr. Sáenz says.

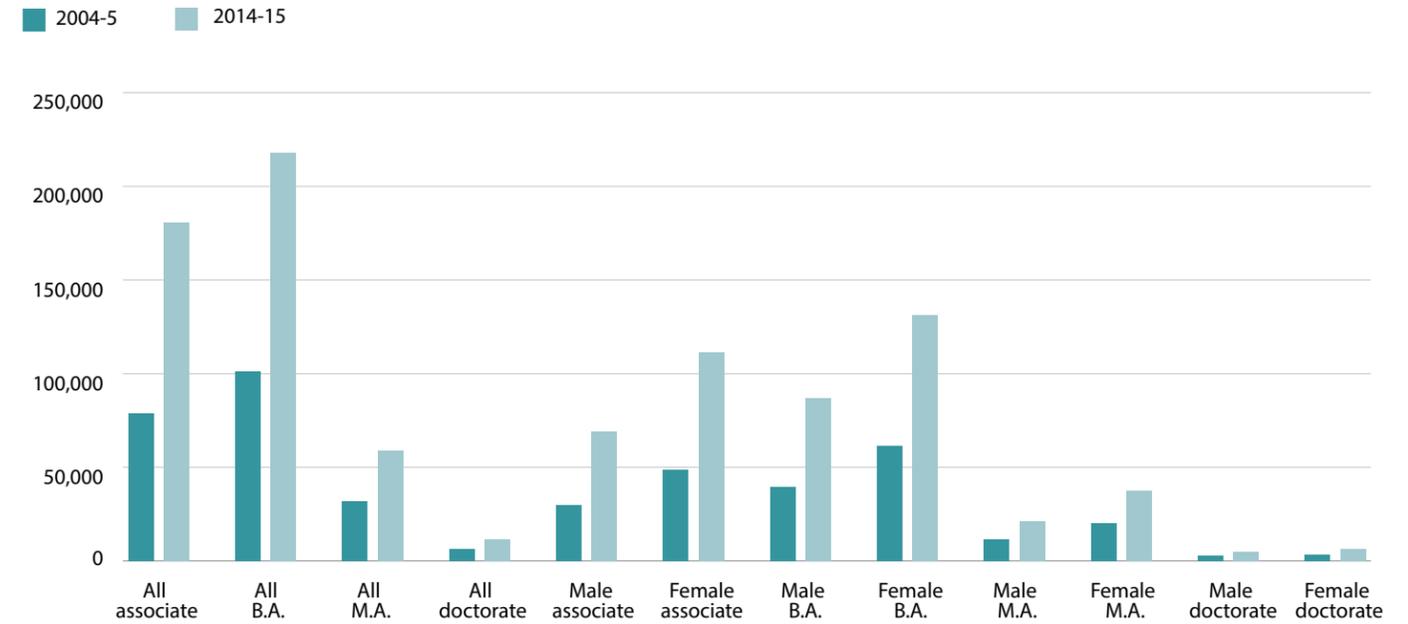
So the researchers started Project MALES (Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success). Since its inception at one high school in 2010, the program has grown to serve eight middle and high schools and more than 100 students.

The project, which works in groups and one on one, targets students who are neither certain to attend college nor likely to drop out of high school. Most are Latino, though the program also serves African-American boys. Two-thirds of mentees do not have a parent or guardian who attended college.

Many of the mentors are first-generation students themselves, but they're not exclusively male.

Degrees Conferred on Hispanic Students, 2004-5 and 2014-15

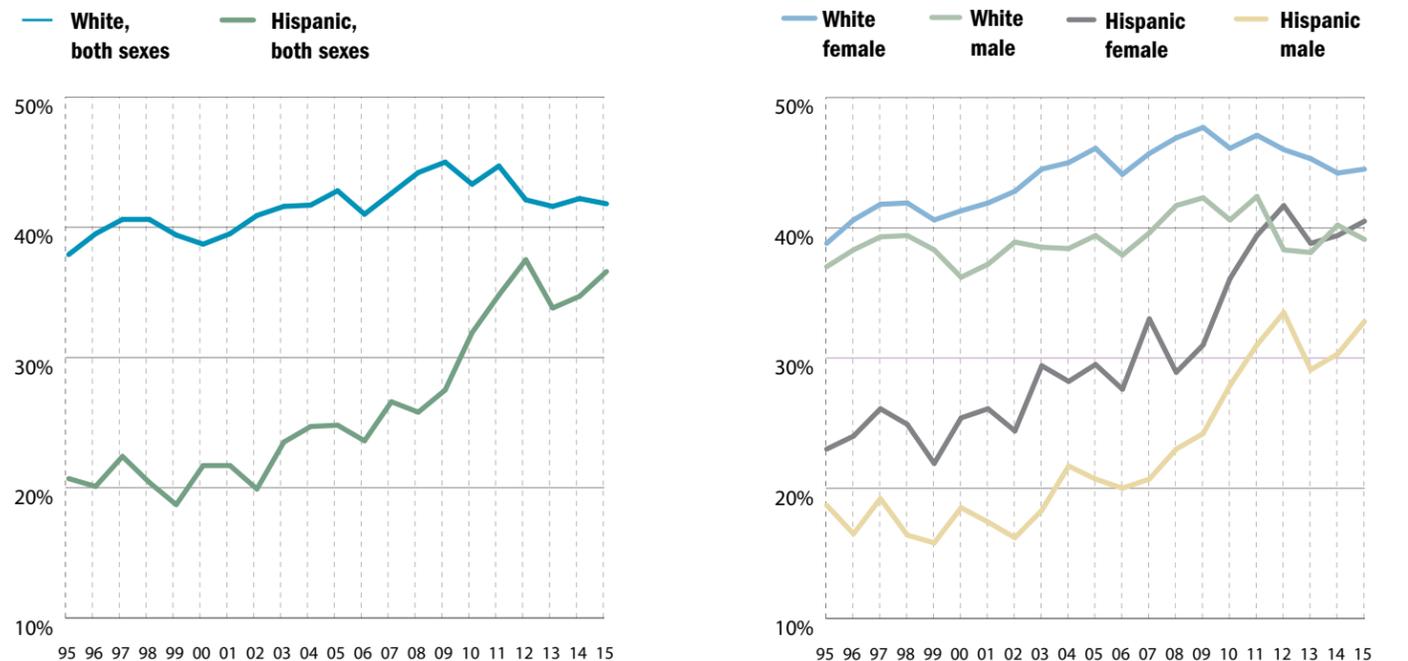
Over a decade, the number of associate and bachelor's degrees awarded to Hispanic students more than doubled, and the number of master's and doctoral degrees nearly doubled. Latinas, however, are earning a disproportionate share of the degrees awarded to Hispanics.



SOURCE: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

Percentage of 18- to 24-Year-Olds Enrolled in Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions, 1995-2015

Over two decades, the share of 18- to 24-year-old Hispanics enrolled in college nearly doubled, and the enrollment gap between white and Hispanic students narrowed considerably. Yet the disparity between Latinos and Latinas has grown.



SOURCE: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS



ILANA PANICH-LINSMAN FOR THE CHRONICLE

A Project MALES mentor advises Latino boys. Females earn more than 60 percent of all undergrad degrees among Latinos. The mentors, who are college students, try to close that gap.

A culture of “machismo” can discourage young Latinos from seeking help when they struggle academically, while *familismo* — valuing close family ties — can encourage them to work to provide for their families.

In fact, more than half are female — a share consistent with the UT student population. Emmet E. Campos, the director of Project MALES, says some of the mentees relate to women better than to men. “For a lot of these young men, the father is absent or works two jobs,” he says. “So their role models are women — their mom, their *abuelita*.”

While the program encourages students to attend college, it doesn’t insist on a degree. Its focus is less on academics than on social and emotional development — the soft skills students need to succeed in college and in life.

One of those skills is coping with failure. Latino boys, who are traditionally given a position of privilege in the family, aren’t being raised to be as resilient as Latina girls, Mr. Sáenz says. “At the first sign of failure, they tend to throw in the towel,” he says. “They’d rather go out and be a bread-winner.”

Project MALES both acknowledges and challenges Latino cultural and gender norms. Mentors share data on the economic benefits of a college degree, showing students that it could make them

better providers. They teach boys how to manage debt so they’re less nervous about borrowing. (Latinos are often debt-averse). But they also teach mentees how to ask for help, and create an environment where the young men feel comfortable opening up.

The program’s reliance on undergraduate mentors is both a strength and a limitation. Middle- and high-school students can see themselves in the mentors, who are often a couple years older than them. At times, though, the program has been “stretched for numbers,” says Mike Gutierrez, program coordinator for Project MALES.

Finding enough graduate students to match the growing number of undergraduate mentors has been a challenge, too. This year, the program switched to a more informal mentoring arrangement: Grad students teach a service-learning class and offer guidance to students considering grad school.

These days, more colleges are paying attention to Latino male success, offering mentoring and peer groups along with academic advising and study skills. But programs for black men and “men of color” generally still far outnumber programs for Latinos, according to a recent survey by the social policy research group MDRC. Another recent survey suggests that may be partly because some college leaders still aren’t aware of the Latino-male

achievement gap, or fear that creating targeted programs could create a political backlash.

Comparing student-success programs for minority men is hard, since colleges track a variety of student outcomes and measure them differently. Mr. Ponjuan, an associate professor of education and human development at Texas A&M University, says colleges need to build a “culture of evidence” for such programs. He oversees program evaluation for a consortium of colleges that Project MALES created in 2014 to spread best practices. “A lot of institutions are not taking the time to do the granular analysis to see how their policies and programs are affecting students” of different races and genders, he says.

Back at Consuelo Mendez Middle School, Enrique Aguayo, the graduate student, is urging the boys to come to the university’s summer leadership academy. They’re noncommittal, until he tells them “it’s going to be a party with Con Mi Madre,” a college-prep program for Latina girls.

“For real?” asks Billy, intrigued.

Victoria Martinez, then a senior at UT, says it was “really difficult” getting the boys to talk, at first. Now, at the end of the year, “I have one student I call *chide*, because he sticks to me, like gum.”

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A Professor ‘Who Looks Like Them’

By KELLY FIELD

FOR GEMA Ludisaca, a first-generation college student at California State University at Northridge, becoming a college professor would be a dream.

“I can’t think of a better thing than to be paid to do research and teach people about your ideas,” says Ms. Ludisaca, one of 30 undergraduate fellows in a new program that aims to expand the ranks of Hispanic faculty members in the humanities.

But her parents, who are undocumented immigrants from Ecuador, see that prospect a bit differently. They’re proud of her, to be sure, but they’re also a bit worried about how she will care for her

5-year-old son.

“They tell me ‘you have a child, your responsibility is to get a job and provide for him,’” she says. “To them, the monetary takes priority over learning. It’s difficult to explain to them.”

This summer, Ms. Ludisaca is taking part in a six-week seminar on her campus and conducting research with a faculty mentor. It’s the first phase of HSI Pathways to the Professoriate, a program that will train undergraduates at Hispanic-Serving Institutions — nonprofit colleges where at least 25 percent of full-time-equivalent undergraduate enrollment is Hispanic — for academic careers.

The Pathways project, created by the Penn Cen-

ter for Minority Serving Institutions, is the latest effort by colleges to cultivate a faculty that mirrors the nation's growing ethnic and racial diversity. The student fellows are both male and female and come from three Hispanic-Serving Institutions: Cal State at Northridge, Florida International University, and the University of Texas at El Paso. Faculty members from five partner research institutions teach the seminar classes and mentor the students.

In 2015, 72 percent of all professors were white, but only 55 percent of undergraduates were, according to Education Department data. Hispanics were particularly underrepresented, accounting for 18 percent of undergraduates but just five percent of the faculty. And that gulf is growing.

Among Hispanics, males still hold a majority of the top jobs — and represent 64 percent of full professors. But that's starting to change as Latinas outnumber Latinos in graduate school. In the 2014-15 academic year, Latinas earned 64 percent of master's degrees and 55 percent of doctorates.

The shortage of Hispanic professors of both sexes is partly due to a "pipeline" problem. Latinos constituted just six percent of doctoral-degree recipients in 2014-15, according to the Education Department. A majority of them attended Hispanic-Serving Institutions and public universities.

There are several theories for why more Hispanics aren't pursuing Ph.D.s, but one barrier seems to be financial: First-generation students (and their immigrant parents) often crave financial security — something academe, with its fierce competition for faculty jobs, can't guarantee.

The shortage of Hispanic and other minority professors limits the diversity of viewpoints taught in the classroom.

Students who, like Ms. Ludisaca, decide to take the gamble often find themselves losing out to graduates from more elite institutions, says Deborah Santiago, co-founder of Excelencia in Education, a nonprofit group that supports Hispanic success in higher education.

The shortage of Hispanic and other minority professors limits the diversity of viewpoints taught in the classroom, and makes it harder for Latino students to see themselves as professors, says Ana Luszczynska, the Pathways coordinator at Florida International. She says she spends a lot of time convincing her students that they're grad-school material. "Without saying anything, what's being

evinced is that this is the province of white people," says Ms. Luszczynska, an associate professor of English.

Elizabeth A. Say, dean of the College of Humanities at Cal State at Northridge, says the program will give her students the help they need to get into highly ranked Ph.D. programs, while enhancing her regional institution's visibility and prestige.

"It's a chance to say our students are every bit as good," she says. "They may need more support, but give them a chance, and they'll succeed."

PATHWAYS to the Professoriate grew out of a decade-old program that brings students from minority-serving institutions to the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education for a crash course on navigating graduate school. Some 250 students have attended that program to date, and 233 have gone on to graduate school, 41 of them at Penn.

Marybeth Gasman, creator of that program, wanted to do something more ambitious, so she approached the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation about creating a wrap-around program that would shepherd Hispanic students directly into graduate school. The foundation, which was already underwriting undergraduate research at minority-serving institutions, liked the idea, and provided \$5.1-million for it.

The Pathways project gives participants a summer research stipend, pays for their GRE prep and grad-school application fees, and provides students with mentors in their undergraduate and graduate programs. It offers an online "lodge," where the fellows can chat with each other and start building their academic network, and it holds a weekly seminar, led by Hispanic graduate students, where fellows "can see someone who looks like them but is a little further along," Ms. Gasman says.

She says she focused the program on Hispanic-serving institutions because half of Latino and Latina undergraduates attend them, and because they send a larger share of students to grad school than do predominantly white institutions.

"So often in the academy, we get fixated on certain students at certain institutions," she says. "There are so many people who would be amazing professors, but they're overlooked because we have such a narrow view of where professors come from."

Ms. Ludisaca, who has never had a Latina professor during her three years at Cal State, says having a mentor who looks like her has made getting her Ph.D. seem less like a "faraway dream."

"A lot of us have impostor syndrome, and a lot of that comes from not having that visual representation of yourself" in the classroom, she says. "Seeing that there are people from similar situations who have made it makes all the difference." ■

A First-Generation Student's Survival Strategy: Work More, Sleep Less

THE SUMMER before I went off to college, I worked three jobs — about 75 hours a week — as a delivery driver for two pizza parlors and as a painter in the local hospital where my dad was a maintenance man. I was saving to pay the deposit for the private residence hall that I was moving into in the fall. I was the first in my family to attend college, and I was making my way without their financial support.

In some ways my family, which was working poor, Mexican-American, and split by divorce, viewed college suspiciously. They saw it as a financial drain taking the place of regular employment, and as a scene that was both morally and politically questionable. I didn't care. I just wanted to get out of town, even if only temporarily — that is, in case I dropped out, which many had predicted.

My financial-aid package would not begin until the fall term started, but I had to pay the dorm deposit before then. I was not chosen in the lottery for on-campus housing, which would have been less expensive. I would learn later that as a scholarship kid, a minority on financial aid, I actually had my choice of dorms. But like a lot of things, I didn't know how it all worked, and there wasn't anyone around to tell me. The information vacuum would last all four years.

A friend drove me the 100 miles to pay the bill in person. Since neither my mom nor I had checking accounts or credit cards, I had only cash. At home we still used money orders from the supermarket to pay bills. So that summer I walked into an empty dorm tower, and when the person at the desk said it would cost \$1,300, I proudly handed her a huge roll of 20s, 10s, 5s and 1s. I don't think she knew what to do with it. I asked for a receipt.

Summers would come to represent annual gaps when I needed money in advance — for housing, for deposits, for moving. I had to earn this on my own. Like my pre-college summer, I regularly cobbled together multiple summer jobs on top of working 20 to 25 hours a week during the school year. Working more and sleeping less was my strategy for everything. Even when this strategy resulted in a case of mononucleosis, I stayed

at college with nowhere to go, as my cash flow was dependent on being a student. It was my job.

As a student who identified as Mexican-American (soon to be Chicano), at a university that was then 85 percent white, I confronted isolation, racism, self-doubt, and feeling out of place. Initially I wanted to quit. It wasn't that people stared or showed hostility toward me. They mostly looked right through me, stood in my way, bumped into me. I was furniture.

I maneuvered the best I could around those roadblocks. Finances were always hard. But to be honest, with scholarships and financial aid, I was never richer. In class, I learned how racism and other discriminations worked for some and against others. I confronted this by replaying my story with a race consciousness. A decade of welfare, family alcoholism, being Chicano, never having vacationed or gone to camp, Christmases without trees or

I wish I had figured out a way at 18 to really experience the university, the intellectual part, the part I stress to my students today.

presents — these would all begin to make sense.

What could today's universities and colleges do differently for a student like me? More money would always help — especially with today's rising costs and astronomical debt — but more information would help, too. First-generation college students, students of color, foster kids, single parents, veterans, and other "others" shouldn't be out of the loop of the opportunities and resources that are available. Institutions should do a better job of reaching out to them.

Bridge and transition programs make a difference at all stages of education. Especially in

COMMENTARY

DAVID HERNÁNDEZ

college, these programs can create early friendships, a sense of cohort, and answer the unaskable — What’s a syllabus? Can I say “I” in my papers? What is a mentor?

Being “normal” and feeling welcomed are often out of reach. On move-in day that first fall term, I recall walking into my predominantly white dorm and feeling that everyone else already knew each other. When did this happen? Was I not invited to something? It was Day 1, and I was already the weird one. This gradually wears students down.

For so many young people, attending college is a rite of passage that places them on a similar plane with parents or other family members. It draws them closer. When you are the first in your family to attend college, it’s the opposite. It tears you away from your family and community. You become permanently dissimilar — different at college, but also at home, simultaneously. Colleges should recognize that some students are making it in their own way, without a support system.

Looking back, I wish there had been a way for me to know more about how college worked — like that my strategy of working more and sleeping less would cut deeply into my education. I wish I had figured out a way at 18 to really experience the university, the intellectual part, the part I stress to my students today. I wish I could go back — if only to read more or more critically, to go to talks and hear speakers. I wish I had studied abroad and completed a thesis.

All told, I still graduated with high honors in a field in which I had no affinities or friends, and I’m pretty sure the other majors never noticed me

anyway. I just wanted to get better grades than they did, and I often did. To beat the person who stood in my path, who never noticed me and regularly crowded my space, was satisfying and fed my confidence. It also lowered the bar. Beating them was fine, but I should have been setting my own goals and looking toward the horizon. I wish I had known that then.

Today, after a circuitous pathway, I am a tenure-track faculty member at a liberal-arts college. I was out of academe for five years before I went to graduate school — again delivering pizzas, working at hotels, and eventually working in the nonprofit sector. I wasn’t on a break at the time. I had finished. I even walked out of my final final exam in econometrics because ... well, I was done with school, and the resulting low grade wouldn’t change a thing.

Eventually, I would return to campus in search of what I had missed the first time around. I had moved beyond just trying to beat out competitors, and instead concentrated on learning for learning’s sake. I was more in the know this time, but I would soon face graduate- and professional-level versions of my earlier challenges — How do you write a syllabus? What does a conference paper look like? Why is everyone speaking in a language that I don’t know? As I figured these things out, I confirmed that I loved being on college campuses — studying, working, and teaching. As in my early college days, I had made it in my own way.

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