## Closing the Achievement Gap: Policies That Make a Difference

I am thrilled to my core when students succeed. And I am surrounded by a community of full-time faculty, part-time faculty, staff, and administrators who feel the same way. The people who recruit, advise, register, and teach our students are dedicated to empowering them to change their lives.

So many wonderful, success stories happen every year at Montgomery College. Students come for education to enter the workforce, to transfer to a university, to upgrade a skill, or to continue their lifelong commitment to learning. Whatever their goals—a degree, a certificate, transfer credit, or personal enrichment—their successes warm my heart.

What troubles my heart, though, are those who don't succeed.

Dreams dashed and hopes unfulfilled are not uncommon: students who drop out or "stop out" of their higher educational pursuits. The reasons are many, and seemingly small factors can sometimes snowball into large barriers. An extra job, for example, to support family members may be necessary. But the job demands may take away from time for school. Less time studying and attending classes

leads to lower grades. Lower grades lead to discouragement. Discouragement leads to dropping out and not reaching a goal.

Hispanic and African American students appear more vulnerable to this dynamic, according to data on Montgomery College students from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS):  three years after entry, first-time, full-time degree-seeking African American and Hispanic students were less likely to graduate and less likely to transfer than their White or Asian peers (IPEDS Graduation Rates 2012–2013 Survey). While 19 percent of white students had graduated or transferred, 15 percent of Hispanic students had done so and only 11 percent of African American students. Retention rates were also problematic: among African American students at MC, fall-to-spring retention was 68 percent while fall-to-fall retention fell to 59 percent. Similarly, Hispanic student retention from fall to spring was 70 percent but dipped to 61 percent from fall to fall.

Despite these numbers, research on the impact of non-cognitive variables on success, including mentoring, is promising. As Montgomery College's Closing the Achievement Gap report of 2013 summarizes, "numerous studies have shown that when African American and Latino students have opportunities to develop relationships with academically strong peers, professors, and other school-based personnel, there is great potential for positive effects."

### *Supporting Student Success*
We do know that students who can devote themselves to their education either full-time or very close to full-time have a better chance of success and completion. A pilot in the City University of New York system called Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) has shown promise in raising completion rates. Community colleges across the country have taken notice, and now three Ohio colleges—Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, Cuyahoga Community College, and Lorain County Community College—are planning to pilot their own versions of ASAP this year.

Aiming for 100 percent of our students to succeed is a lofty goal—some would say unrealistic—but until every single student who comes to Montgomery College is successful, we have room for improvement. If there were a simple magic formula for student success, it would have already been found. I am not going to claim discovery of a special formula, but I do know that there are three important ingredients in student success: money, support, and structure.

Of these three, money—or the challenge of not having enough money—is often the driving factor in students' decisions to stop out or drop out of their educations. Despite the College's best efforts to assist students financially, personal and family needs can be overwhelming and disrupt the best laid education plans. In fiscal year 2014, MC students qualified for and received $32,000,000 in federal Pell grants and another $32,500,000 in federal loans, work-study programs, state grants, and other programs. In addition, students also received $4,500,000 in scholarships and grants through the College and the Montgomery College Foundation. These are impressive amounts of financial support brought to bear for our students' futures and they are excellent investments. These funds helps students stay in school.

Support takes many forms including academic, personal, and social. College services in this arena are plentiful. Libraries, learning centers, and career services throughout the College offer out-of-class academic support with supplemental learning resources, tutoring, career planning, and job market exploration. Counselors and advisers can help students clarify their own individual plans or provide resources for addressing personal issues. The College's commitment to intrusive advising means that students who might previously have slipped through the cracks will encounter advisers at multiple times in their educational career. These advisers will also share information about students more efficiently and thoroughly with teachers and other mentors, to sound an alert at the first hint of student difficulty. Social

supports that build connections—so important for retention—are also numerous through student organizations, clubs, and student government. Together these supports form a web that protects students and keeps them motivated to achieve.

The third of these three elements, structure, is the topic that has our collective attention and the aspect we need most to improve. By structure here I mean clear expectations, clear processes, and clear pathways that help students succeed. There are expectations, processes, and pathways for students throughout their educational experience, but those that are most important start at the beginning.

### *Structured Beginnings*

One example of a beginning activity needing structure is registration. Many community college students—not just at Montgomery College—register for classes very close to the start date, or even after the start date. For years, community colleges thought this approach was "student friendly," that is, it gave students what they needed when they needed it. However, this practice flies in the face of thoughtful planning. Registration at MC starts months before classes begin, but the majority of registration currently takes place in the final two or three weeks before the term begins. When students do things at the last minute, their plans may be incomplete or haphazard. Life plans and education plans should not be conjured at the last minute. In fact, research tells us that students who start a class after it has begun have a very low chance of succeeding. Having on-time registration as an expectation, then, is a sound, research-based strategy for helping students to succeed.

This notion of getting off to a good beginning is so important that the College community made it the first truth of the Common Student Experience: "start smart." In addition to on-time registration, a thorough orientation—that is, a thorough *mandatory* orientation—makes a difference in students' success. Excellent orientations have been offered by faculty and staff

at MC for years, but students who need the support the most have not availed themselves of the service.

As Kay McClenney, former director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement, is famous for saying, "students don't do optional."

### *Structured Middles and Endings*

But structure is not just important at the beginning. Intrusive advising throughout the educational process will help keep better tabs on students. Improved technology will allow for sharing of student data in a confidential yet informative way with the "early alert" component of Starfish system being employed to track students' progress. Getting to the "end" goal will also be carefully tracked. Another good indicator of future success is completing developmental courses and then moving on to take challenging college-level courses promptly.

And, as our mission statement says, we hold ourselves accountable. I am developing a Student Success Report Card to track our progress on key student indicators. This Report Card will form the basis of our collective efforts and contain "actionable" data, that is, data that faculty and staff can act on—right now—to make a difference in student success. And the data will be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, and age range so that we can watch and record our success in closing the achievement gap.  When combined with the right tools and strategies, this focus will motivate achievement and create a culture of accountability.

### *Policy Development*

The Board of Trustees was among the first to express its concerns about the structural issues in the educational experience. We know that excellent teaching is happening across the College. However, the student experience before getting into class—while done very well for many students over the years—needs to be enhanced for all students. Expectations need to be

clear for everyone and best practices need to be emphasized to align our efforts with the goal of student success.

It is to this end that the Board has recognized the need for a Student Success Policy. This policy would speak to the success of every student and make clear the expectations that best and promising practices for supporting students would be implemented. We have, therefore, engaged the College community in our policy development process by sharing a draft Student Success Policy this year and engaging in vigorous discussion about it. The discussion has given faculty and staff the opportunity to articulate how we can implement these important student success practices and how they may impact us.

The fundamental idea here is that when students follow sound pathways—structured beginnings—they start their classes on a better footing. When they start smart, the challenges they inevitably face later, both academic and personal, will hopefully be more manageable. When they have a firm foundation and can manage their challenges, they should be more successful in their classes. When they are successful in their classes, they reach their goals. We believe that our many strategies for closing the gap will be enhanced by the adoption of this policy.

With the right policies and the right implementation, I know we will find ways to prevent more students from dropping out or stopping out, and Montgomery College will have more and more success stories.

**Discussion Questions**
1. What information stands out for you in this report?
2. How do structured processes help all of us in our daily lives?
3. How can students be encouraged and supported in adopting good habits regarding their education, such as registering on time?