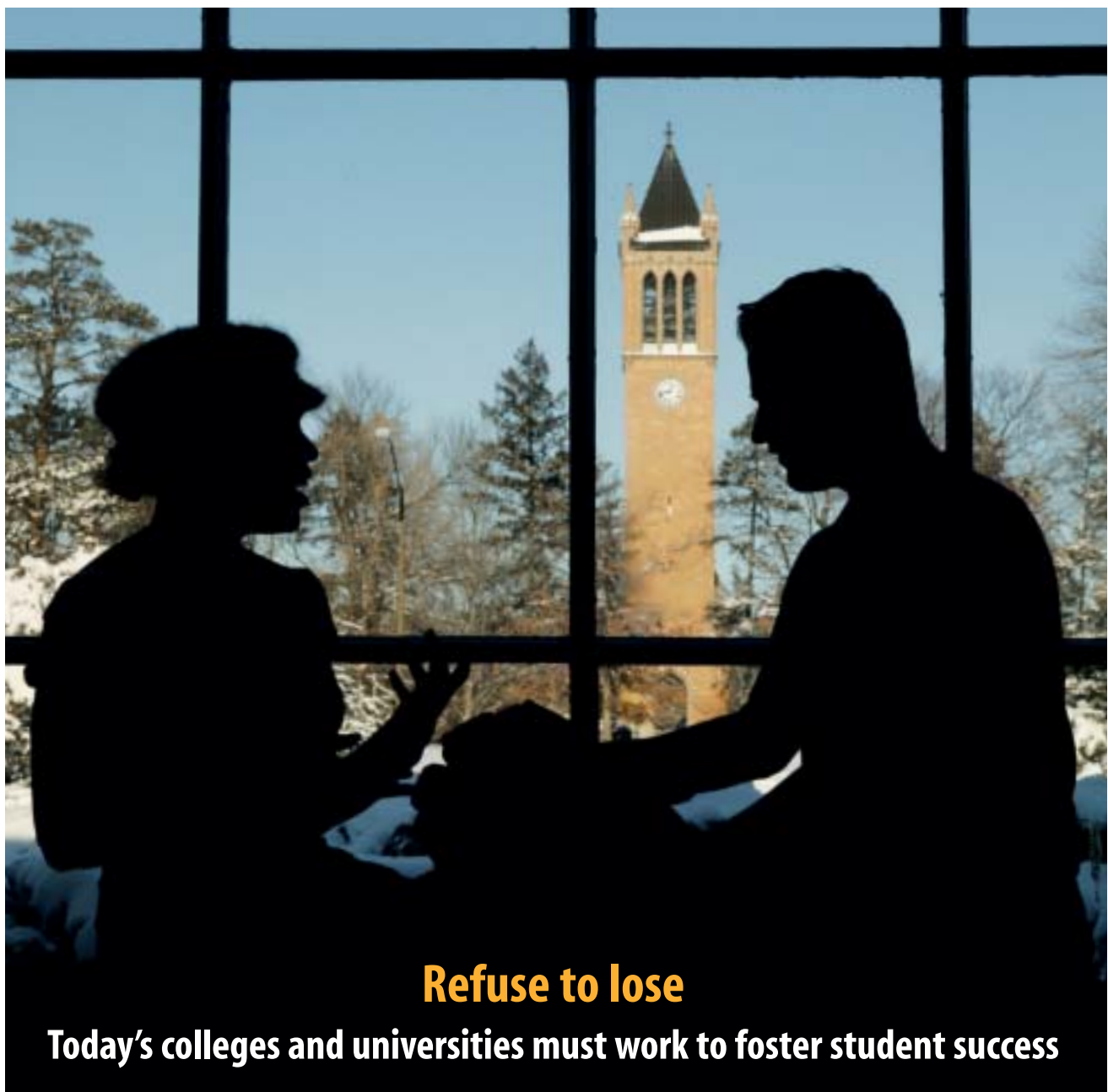


LUMINA FOUNDATION

FOCUSTM

Spring 2004



Refuse to lose

Today's colleges and universities must work to foster student success

INSIDE



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TALK TO US

This issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus* magazine explores a topic that is central to our mission as an organization and vital to the nation's future: enhancing the success of postsecondary students — particularly students historically underserved by higher education.

We know — and the following article shows — that postsecondary success is not a one-size-fits-all proposition and that it is rarely achieved along a straight-line path. Students' needs differ and change. Postsecondary institutions have various methods of meeting those needs — methods shaped by their individual missions, their budgets, their histories and traditions.

In short, though nearly everyone agrees that more must be done to enhance students' chances for success, views differ on exactly what to do and how to do it.

We don't pretend that this article — or any piece in any magazine — offers "the key" to student retention and success. We don't have all the answers. But we certainly want to raise the questions, to encourage constructive discourse about these issues — about all issues related to our mission of enhancing access and success in postsecondary education. That's why we welcome your views.

Future issues of *Lumina Foundation Focus* will include a page of letters from readers. Please write or e-mail to the addresses below to comment on what you read on these pages or to state your views on other issues that affect higher education access and success.

We look forward to hearing — and sharing — your comments. Thank you,

David S. Powell
Director of Publications
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Lumina Foundation for Education, a private, independent foundation, strives to help people achieve their potential by expanding access and success in education beyond high school. Through research, grants for innovative programs and communication initiatives, Lumina Foundation addresses issues surrounding access and success — particularly among underserved student groups, including adult learners. The Foundation bases its mission on the belief that postsecondary education remains one of the most beneficial investments that individuals can make in themselves and that society can make in its people.

Persistence is a group project

"Finish what you start."

That advice echoes in our memories, doesn't it? We've all heard it countless times, and we've all used it, too – to admonish a distracted child, cheer a flagging athlete or support a discouraged peer.

Like most memorable lines, its power is in its simplicity – its ability to cut a straight, clear path through the complex and often contradictory forces that govern human behavior. Those four little words make it sound so easy: Just keep going until you're done.

But it's not always easy. Ask anyone involved in postsecondary education today, and you'll learn quickly that students don't always finish what they start. In fact, some measures of student attrition are downright alarming. For instance, recent data from the National Center for Educational Statistics show that, even after six years, two of every five students who enroll at four-year institutions with the goal of earning a bachelor's degree fail to reach that goal.

Not surprisingly, dropout or "stop-out" rates are even higher among traditionally underserved populations – low-income students, first-generation students, students of color and adult learners. Many of these historically underserved students face multiple barriers to success in college: lack of funds, inadequate academic preparation, family or work obligations, unfamiliarity with the academic environment, insufficient support from family or peers.

For many students in these vulnerable populations, staying in school requires extraordinary effort – from the students themselves, from the colleges and universities they attend, and from the public policies and resources that set the environment. Demographic and economic trends aren't helping either. The number of low-income and minority students is growing rapidly at the same time our economy is demanding an increasing percentage of college-educated workers.

This issue of *Lumina Foundation Focus* takes a detailed look at student success

(what colleges and universities often refer to as "student retention"). We use the term to describe the process of keeping students enrolled and on track toward their educational goals, whether in a four-year degree or certification program.

This issue – which features the work of noted higher education writer Edward B. "Ted" Fiske, author of *The Fiske Guide to Colleges* and former education editor at *The New York Times* – examines student success from several angles.

You'll read about the struggles of people such as Christina Dorman, a first-generation student who, in her first year of college, attended three separate institutions in two states; Angela and Melissa Watson, New Hampshire-born sisters who took widely divergent college paths – with widely differing results; Tecreshia Hoover and Judy Tran, Michigan State University students who say they've benefited greatly from the university's transitional program for first-year students; and Donnell Bivens, an athlete-turned-scholar who thrived in a mentoring program at Iowa State University, earned his master's degree and is now a mentor-counselor at a New York college.

We hope these real-life stories – as well as the insights shared by noted researchers, campus officials and retention experts across the nation – will deepen our collective understanding of the many factors that affect student success. The deeper our understanding, the better able we'll be to raise the level of that success, particularly among the nontraditional students for whom higher education was not originally designed. And that goal – increasing postsecondary access and success – has been Lumina Foundation's mission from the start.

Admittedly, we started something we can't truly "finish," but the job is too important to avoid. Fortunately, it's also a job we share – with the people profiled in these pages and with thousands of other committed citizens just like you.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Martha D. Lamkin". The script is fluid and cursive.

Martha D. Lamkin

President and CEO, Lumina Foundation for Education

Success



Christina Dorman (above) had a rocky start in college, but overcame her first-year troubles and graduated last May from Keene State College in Keene, N.H. She attributes much of her success to "becoming involved" — forging close

relationships with peers and faculty members. Now, as a head mentor with the Foundation for Excellent Schools, she helps others forge similar relationships, encouraging teens in Vermont schools to prepare for postsecondary education.



By Edward B. Fiske

Seven months after her high school graduation, Christina Dorman had already dropped out of two colleges. The daughter of Maine potato farmers and the first in her family to continue studies beyond high school, Dorman started out at Plymouth State College in New Hampshire on a field hockey scholarship. She had roommate problems, though, and felt "so lonely that I stopped eating." Within three weeks she was on the phone, pleading with her father to come pick her up.

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Dorman enrolled the following week at the University of Maine at Orono but found it overwhelming. "No one knew me," she recalled. "I was just a number." So once again she packed up and applied to Keene State College in Keene, N.H., where she found a niche. She played lacrosse, joined a sorority, developed a close relationship with faculty members and graduated in May of 2003. "I think having friends and becoming involved made the difference this time," she said. "That and the fact that adults cared about me."

Stories such as Chris Dorman's are occurring with growing frequency these days. As she and millions of other children of baby boomers swell the ranks of U.S. colleges and universities, they challenge institutions to deal

with increasingly diverse student bodies. Students like Dorman, who enroll in a four-year residential program right out of high school, are no longer the norm – and even many of those who fit this category come to campus with needs and expectations that defy traditional patterns.

For U.S. colleges and universities, the challenge these days isn't so much to attract more students; rather, it is to help students succeed once they get there – and it's not at all clear that this challenge is being met. A recent report from the American Council on Education (ACE) points out that only one in six undergraduates is a "typical" student who enrolls at a residential campus as an 18-year-old, stays four years and graduates with a baccalaureate degree. Data from the National Center for Education

HOW EXTENSIVE IS THE DROPOUT PROBLEM?

Getting a handle on the extent of the dropout problem in American colleges and universities is tricky. Individual institutions regularly publish figures on how many of their first-year students eventually obtain degrees, and such data can be aggregated. A recent report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) concluded that only 55 percent of bachelor's degree seekers who embarked on their studies at a four-year institution in 1995-96 graduated from that institution within six years.

One problem with such institutional data is the increase in "swirling behavior" – where a student drops out of one institution but then enrolls in another college or university. "Students are increasingly packaging credits from various places and then finding an institution that will give them a credential," said Peter Ewell, vice president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS). "Some students even enroll in multiple institutions at the same time."

Ewell and his colleagues at NCHEMS are investigating methods that would enable institutions and states to share more specific data on students' enrollment and dropout decisions. He and other researchers, who have long cited the need for a more comprehensive way to assess students' progress, say such data sharing would provide a fuller, more accurate

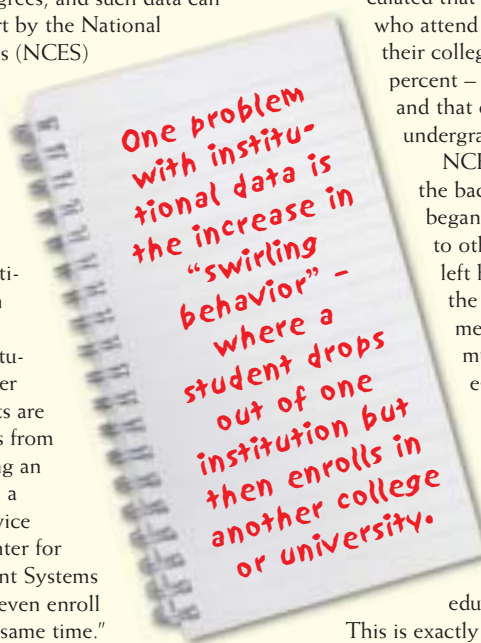
picture of student transfer and attainment rates.

Even without that comprehensive system, however, it's clear that today's students are on the move. U.S. Department of Education analyst Clifford Adelman calculated that the proportion of undergraduates who attend more than one institution during their college careers has now surpassed 60 percent – up from 40 percent in 1970 – and that only three of every five such undergraduates complete degrees.

NCES estimates that 23 percent of the bachelor's degree candidates who began studies in 1995-1996 transferred to other institutions, while 13 percent left higher education altogether. Thus the overall bachelor's degree attainment rate would most likely be much higher than the initial estimate of 55 percent.

A more promising way to estimate retention and dropout rates is to use longitudinal research that follows particular cohorts of students and gathers information on their progress through postsecondary education and into the labor force.

This is exactly what NCES has done with its Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS), which identified 10,600 first-year students in 1989 and collected data on them in 1992 and 1994. A second cohort was identified in 1996. The study calculated that 63 percent of bachelor's degree seekers in the most recent cohort had graduated from that or another institution within six years.



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Statistics (NCES) show that only 55 percent of students who embark on bachelor's degrees at four-year colleges and universities end up with a degree six years later. Even if you count students who transfer to other institutions, NCES data show, the proportion is only about 60 percent.

"Retention is the Achilles heel of American higher education," says Patrick M. Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. "With the exception of schools at the top end, colleges and universities are not succeeding in retaining and graduating sufficient numbers of their students. If they were public schools, we would put them in receivership."

Apparently some politicians think that cracking down on colleges with poor graduation rates might not be such a bad idea. The calls for greater accountability that have been heard at the primary and secondary levels for more than a decade are now being sounded in higher education as well. The Bush administration has sent signals that it wants to find ways to reward colleges with high retention and graduation rates as part of the upcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

Regional accrediting agencies now routinely look at student performance and graduation rates, and the term "performance-based funding" has become common in the lexicon of state legislators. According to a recent report by the Rockefeller Institute of Government at the State University of New York, 36 states now link some share of their tax-dollar support for public colleges and universities to measures of institutional performance, including graduation and retention rates.

Much of this political scrutiny of student success rates is rooted in the fact that the national economy needs more college graduates in today's information age than it did during the industrial era. (See related item at right.) The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that new jobs available to workers with a high school education or less will grow by only 12 percent between 1998 and 2008 – much lower than the comparable growth rates for jobs requiring bachelor's degrees (22 percent) and associate's degrees (31 percent).

Americans used to pride themselves on the fact that the United States sent a much higher proportion of its high school graduates on to postsecondary education than did European and other developed countries, where many students were channeled into vocational and technical programs in their early teens. But this pattern no longer holds. Data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) show that in 2001 only 39 percent of young adults aged 24 to 35 in the U.S. had obtained a postsecondary degree – a figure that put the United States behind Canada, Ireland, Japan and Korea.

The growing diversity of the student population means that the very students who in the past have been most at risk of dropping out of college – those from low-income families, students of color, first-generation college students – constitute an increasingly significant proportion of all students in higher education.

A NEW KIND OF EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

The industrial-era workplace that lasted into the mid-20th century asked its "factory-model" primary and secondary schools to turn out large numbers of workers who could apply a fixed set of skills throughout a working lifetime. Such a workplace did not need a lot of managers capable of high-order thinking and problem solving. Thus the school-reform movements of the last two decades can be viewed as an attempt to figure out how to educate large masses of students to a level that was demanded of only a small proportion in previous generations.

U.S. higher education now faces the same challenge. As Patrick M. Callan of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education puts it: "It's moving from being a sorting system to one where we have to ratchet up the skill levels of whole populations. That's what other countries are doing, and we have to do likewise. For years the U.S. has been losing low-end jobs to other countries. We're going to lose high-end jobs as well if we can't produce the workers."

U.S. Census data show, for example, that the number of Hispanics enrolled in American colleges has more than tripled since 1980, to nearly 1.5 million, while the Hispanic share of bachelor's degrees has risen from 2.3 percent to 6.2 percent. The College Board reported that the proportion of minority students taking the SAT in 2002 reached an all-time high of 36 percent, up six points from 10 years ago. Thirty-eight percent were first-generation college-bound students, which is one percentage point above the 2001 figure.

Economics also are driving the new interest in retention. Richard A. Miller, a researcher at the higher education consulting firm of Noel-Levitz, estimates that American colleges and universities lose approximately \$1 billion a year in tuition and fees from first-year attrition alone, and that the loss of earnings for each cohort of students that drops out of college totals more than \$4 billion.

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The costs to individuals who fail to graduate also are becoming increasingly evident. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the wage premium of a bachelor's degree versus a high school diploma is \$900,000 over a working lifetime. The cost is even greater for dropouts who take on loans to finance their college education and end up with debts to pay but no academic credentials to help them do so.

Reasonable people can disagree about how well colleges and universities have risen to the retention challenge. George D. Kuh, a professor of higher education at Indiana University, makes the "glass is half full" case by citing the growing diversity in the student

population. "There are a whole bunch of people in college today who in the past would have been summarily dismissed as not belonging in higher education – or at least as belonging in a different type of institution," he said. "It is an achievement of our time that we have not lost ground."

That may be so, but the uneven way that dropouts are distributed across U.S. higher education seems troubling by any measure. Studies show that students at certain types of institutions – most notably residential, independent four-year colleges – have a far better chance of graduating than their peers at other types of institutions. Likewise there is abundant evidence that

PERSISTENCE AT DIFFERENT KINDS OF INSTITUTIONS

A significant body of research shows that retention and graduation rates differ widely among various types of institutions and those that display certain characteristics.

- **Public versus private institutions.** Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that students who enrolled at public four-year institutions in 1995-1996 were less likely than peers at private, not-for-profit institutions to earn a bachelor's degree at their first institutions (50 percent versus 65 percent). Counting students who earned a degree at another institution, the rates were 61 percent and 76 percent, respectively.
- **Two-year versus four-year colleges.** Students who start out at a two-year college with plans to move on to a four-year college for a bachelor's degree face an uphill battle. Patrick Terenzini, a senior scientist and professor

of higher education at Pennsylvania State University, estimates that beginning pursuit of a bachelor's degree at a two-year rather than a four-year institution reduces one's chances of ultimately earning a four-year degree by 15 to 20 percentage points.

- **Concentrations of low-income students.** Research conducted by M. Lee Upcraft and Jennifer L. Crissman have shown that institutions with high concentrations of low-income students have lower graduation rates than institutions with lower concentrations of such students.
- **Local factors.** Dropout rates also are affected by idiosyncrasies of particular institutions. "Retention has a local address," said Richard Miller of Noel-Levitz, citing two examples: "You are vulnerable if you have lousy study habits and go to a (rigorous) college ... or if you are an agnostic attending a Christian institution."

PERSISTENCE AMONG DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF STUDENTS

Clearly, all students face the challenges of completing postsecondary education successfully, but research and anecdotal evidence show that the challenges are particularly great for certain groups of students. Several factors have been shown to affect student persistence. Among them:

- **Socioeconomic status.** Not surprisingly, retention rates differ among students of varying socioeconomic backgrounds. A study by Jacqueline King, director of

the Center for Policy Analysis at the American Council on Education (ACE), found that 25 percent of middle- and upper-income first-year students had left college without a degree by 1998, compared with 40 percent of low-income freshmen.

- **Race and ethnicity.** Multiple studies have shown that students of color persist and graduate at lower rates than whites and Asians, even though postsecondary enrollment rates for students of color are similar for all

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certain kinds of students – members of racial and ethnic minorities, those from low-income backgrounds and those who are the first in their families to attend college – are particularly vulnerable to leaving school without completing their program or earning a degree.

Such inequities raise disturbing questions, not only about educational equity, but also about the ability of colleges and universities to handle the kinds of students now arriving on campus. "From a democratic and economic perspective, there are few areas in public policy that present such profound and substantial returns," said Miller of Noel-Levitz. "Most campus officials will agree that student success is an urgent issue."

The roots of the dropout problem

Much research has been done to investigate the causes of dropping out and to explore ways to enhance retention. College officials are quick to cite two issues that to a considerable extent are beyond their control: financial pressures and poor academic preparation in high school.

For 19-year-old Kassandra Nuenoom of Westminster, Vt., financial pressure was a major issue. A top student in a vocational high school and the first in her family to attend college, Nuenoom enrolled in the

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groups. The Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS), for example, found that only about half of the students of color (53 percent of African-Americans, 52 percent of Hispanics, and 50 percent of Native Americans) who first enrolled in a four-year college in 1996 had persisted at the same institution three years later, compared with 64 percent of whites and 71 percent of Asians. The trends over time, however, are positive for all groups.

- **First-generation students.** Researcher Susan P. Choy of MPR Associates finds that students from homes where neither parent had earned a bachelor's degree are about twice as likely as those with a college-educated parent to leave before their second year (23 percent versus 10 percent). Similarly, Paul B. Thayer, an authority on retention at Colorado State University, has shown that such students are likely to enter college not as well prepared academically as their peers who have college-educated parents. They also have limited information about the college experience (including how to finance it) and are less likely to receive informal family support in coping with problems.

- **Delayed enrollment.** Students who enter higher education right out of high school are more likely to

succeed than those who delay entry into college. NCES found that approximately 33 percent of students who delayed postsecondary enrollment left in three years without a credential, compared with about 14 percent of those who did not delay.

There is, of course, considerable overlap among the various personal and institutional factors shown to be associated with persistence in college. Low-income students, for example, are much more likely to be first-generation students, delay entering college, begin at two-rather than four-year institutions and go to public rather than private institutions. In fact, most experts in student persistence resist attempts to isolate any one factor as the "leading cause" of attrition among students.

NCES has identified seven "risk factors," seven threats to a student's ability to persist through graduation. (See list at left.) The more of these factors that apply to a student, the less likely he or she is to attain a degree.

Three staff members at the University of Arizona – Dudley B. Woodard Jr., Sherry L. Mallory and Anne M. De Luca – have compiled an even more detailed list,

identifying 40 factors that affect student success – some inherent to students, some to institutions, and some rooted in the academic practices and efforts that an institution employs. For a list of these factors, see the Fall 2001 issue of *NASPA Journal*, available online at: <http://publications.naspa.org/naspajournal/vol39/iss1/art4/>.



"Risk factors" – seven threats to a student's ability to persist through graduation.

1. Delayed enrollment
2. Part-time enrollment
3. Being a single parent
4. Having children under 18
5. Being financially independent of one's parents
6. Working full time
7. Lacking a high school diploma

"I was working 35 hours a week and going to school full time. I was overwhelmed..."

—Kassandra Nuenoom



Kassandra Nuenoom arranges flowers at a farm stand in southeastern Vermont — a job she feels will help her reach her ultimate goal of owning a wedding shop. She tried college, attending one semester at the University of

Massachusetts in Stockbridge. But the pressures of balancing work and school proved too great, and she dropped out. She plans now to pursue a business degree by taking online courses.

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horticultural school at the University of Massachusetts in Stockbridge with some scholarship assistance. But she found it difficult to find the right balance of school and work. "I had to pay for school myself," she said. "I have a car and have to pay car insurance, expenses, food – and I have my own apartment. I was working 35 hours a week and going to school full time. I was overwhelmed and got very sick."

The situation was complicated by the fact that she was taking classes that were more focused on agriculture than on her main interest – horticulture. "I did well in my classes, but I was not sure if I should still spend so much money on schooling," Nuenoom said. She decided to drop out of school and try to "understand what I really want to do."

She is now working as a floral designer at a large farm stand in southeastern Vermont but has begun taking business courses on the Internet. "Now I am ready to take classes again," she said. "I am the type of person who needs to understand what I am good at. I want to have my own business, such as a wedding shop, in the future. Now I can connect what I am learning to my future business."

Kassandra Nuenoom's story illustrates how important it is for postsecondary students to properly manage their finances. Nuenoom admits now that she did not have a clear understanding of how financial aid worked at Stockbridge or what financial counseling services were available. "By the time I found it, it was too late," she recalled.

Substantial research shows the importance of realistic financial aid policies. A 2003 NCES study of students who received financial aid in their first year at four-year institutions concluded that those who received more aid were less likely to depart within three years than those who received less aid. Other studies have demonstrated the positive impact of financial aid on students' persistence, especially when the aid takes the form of grants or scholarships as opposed to loans, which are now the most common form of financial aid.

Officials report that many low-income students are understandably reluctant to incur debt and prefer to take part-time – or even full-time – jobs, as Nuenoom did. But such a strategy can become counterproductive if it reaches the point where students cannot concentrate sufficiently on their studies. The gradual shift in federal financial aid policy in recent years toward greater reliance on loans rather than grants does not bode well for low-income students.

Researchers also have confirmed the importance of a solid high school curriculum for college persistence and retention. Using NCES data, Susan Choy of MPR Associates found that, among students entering a four-year institution, 87 percent of those who had taken a rigorous curriculum in high school – especially in math – were still on track to a bachelor's degree three years later. This compared with only 62 percent of those who had followed a basic high school curriculum. Clifford

Adelman, a senior research analyst at the U.S. Department of Education, adds that the academic intensity and quality of the high school curriculum is particularly important for the persistence of African-American and Latino students.

But some trends in high school preparation may be going in the wrong direction. The proportion of college students taking at least one year of remedial coursework rose from 28 percent to 35 percent between 1995 and 2000, according to NCES data.

Some experts warn that it's easy to overstate the link between poor academic preparation and dropout rates. "Colleges like to say that the No. 1 reason is under-preparedness – but the reality is that only a quarter of those who do not return for sophomore year will have left in poor academic standing," said John Gardner, an expert on retention issues and a Senior Fellow at the University of South Carolina. "I've always operated on the assumption that all students are at risk."

The importance of engagement

A wide body of research over the last quarter-century has shown that, although financial problems and academic preparation can be important determinants of student persistence, the overall picture is a lot more complicated.

Consider the story of Angela and Melissa Watson, sisters who, like Nuenoom, grew up in Westminster, Vt., and were the first in their families to attend college. Angela, the older sister and a business major, graduated in 2003 from Keene State College; Melissa



Angela Watson (left) and her younger sister, Melissa, took alternative paths in college, though both dropped out for a time. Angela earned a business degree at a four-year institution, while Melissa is in a nursing program at a technical college.

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will have transferred twice before completing her degree in nursing.

Both sisters benefited from Angela's involvement with the Vermont Student Association Corporation, a college-preparatory program for first-generation college students. Their parents also were very supportive and excited about their daughters' decisions to pursue higher education. Nevertheless, both Angela and Melissa were apprehensive about college, particularly its cost. Their anxiety grew when their father was laid off from work.

In the fall of 1998, Angela enrolled at Keene State College, located in Keene, N.H., about 30 minutes from her home. "My first day, I was so scared," she recalled. "I had never been this scared. Orientation was good, but not very personal, so the second I got my schedule I found the exact location of every class and wrote down how to get there so I wouldn't get lost." She was surprised by the amount of reading required, as well as by the cost of books. In spite of her concerns, Angela engaged in campus activities and began to enjoy her life as a college student.

After her sophomore year, she decided to take a leave of absence. "I wanted some time to save money, to think, and to be near my sister," she said. Angela's decision disappointed her parents, and her mother insisted she take a job alongside her – on a factory assembly line – to give Angela a glimpse of what awaited her if she failed to earn her degree.

Angela eventually regretted her decision to leave the campus. She says, "I missed college, my friends, and even homework." When she returned to campus the following January, she found a supportive professor who became her adviser. Her classes were fairly small and intimate. She resumed her role as a campus tour guide, began work as a resident assistant, took part in a radio station and wrote for a newspaper.

Melissa chose to attend a large state institution roughly two hours from home. A nursing major, Melissa was in several large lecture classes, including an

introductory psychology class with about 450 students. "We had to sit with a name card in front of us," Melissa recalled. "When they randomly selected a name to answer a question, we would have to raise our hand, stand up, show our card and then answer the question."

Like her sister, Melissa struggled with the cost of books as well as nursing equipment. "Nursing books cost almost \$1,000 a semester," she points out. Unlike Angela, Melissa did not seem to have time for campus activities, although she did have a social outlet through

her friends. "Every time I talked to her at school, she was always studying for a test or doing homework," recalled Angela.

At the end of her second year, Melissa missed the minimum standard by one point in a general education class and was faced with the prospect of enrolling in summer school to keep up with her class. She sought help from her adviser, who passed her on to the librarian. Neither provided Melissa with much help, and in the end she was unable to enroll in the course she needed.

Crushed by the experience, Melissa reluctantly decided not to return to the university. "No adult knew who I was or seemed to care, not even my adviser," she recalled. "During the summer my dad was in a car accident, my grandmother was sick with cancer, and my mom lost her job, so I decided to stay home and help."

After returning home, Melissa enrolled in New Hampshire Technical College, where she is now

taking courses while she works. She plans to move to Maine or to Burlington, Vt. – places where she can pursue a nursing program in an area that offers promising job prospects after graduation.

Clearly, many factors influenced the differing paths that Angela and Melissa took in postsecondary education: their individual personalities, their choices of majors and the institutions they attended. But experts on college retention would certainly suggest that Angela was aided by her ability to be actively and constructively involved in campus life. Indeed, the concept of "student engagement" has become a dominant



Student communities are consciously created at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County (UMBC). Members of the university's EMS Bike Team — (from left) Rudolph Cartier III, Patricia Pflug, Brett Patterson, Kelly Joplin and Randy Nunn — provide first aid at campus events.

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theme in discussions of college retention and student attainment.

"We've added the word 'connections' to the university dictionary," said Theodore W. Elling, vice chancellor for student affairs at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. "We found that if new freshmen are exposed to a person, an activity group on campus, a structured program, or if they have a relation to a faculty member, then they are much more likely to persist and do well."

Noted researchers Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini have found that the rate at which first-year students returned for their second year was "positively and significantly related to the total amount of non-classroom contact with faculty, and particularly to frequency of interactions with faculty to discuss intellectual matters."

Dorm life helps

One particular form of engagement – living in on-campus residence halls – has been shown to be particularly powerful. Alexander Astin of the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) calculated that living in a residence hall during the first year increases a student's chance of finishing college by 12 percent.

Such insights into the importance of active involvement with campus life have been reinforced recently by findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a \$3.3 million project based at Indiana University in Bloomington, Ind. Since 2000, NSSE has surveyed 435,000 first-year and senior students at 730 four-year colleges and universities. George Kuh, director of the project, said that the study has shown a positive relationship between purposeful educational activities and both academic success and retention – especially among lower-ability students and students of color. "Looking for ways to enhance student engagement is a promising lever that institutions can pull," Kuh says.

One way in which hundreds of colleges and universities are addressing the retention issue is by setting up "learning communities." These take a wide variety of forms, from a few shared courses to schools-within-schools where students live and study in a common building and engage in activities such as community service. They go under various names such as "living-learning communities," "linked courses" and "freshman interest groups." A National Learning Communities Project has been established at Evergreen State College in Washington to promote the idea.

The underlying notion of learning communities is that students benefit both socially and academically from contact with a small group of fellow undergraduates. The concept is an outgrowth of more than a decade of research, much of it conducted by Vincent Tinto of Syracuse University.

Studies by Tinto and others have shown that participation in a learning community can enhance first-year student persistence rates and have a positive impact on grades and perceptions about college. One nationwide study by M. Lee Upcraft and Jennifer Crissman Ishler, for example, found that retention rates for students who participated in learning communities "averaged 10 to 20 percentage points higher than typical institution averages."

At Appalachian State University in Boone, N.C., 60 percent of first-year students are in one of 65 Freshmen Learning Communities (FLC) – where students live together, take a freshman seminar and engage in other common activities. College officials report that, between 1998 and 2002, the returning rate for sophomores was four percentage points higher for FLC participants than for their non-FLC peers, even though the program ballooned from 80 to more than 1,300 students during that period.

Another institution that has embraced the idea of living-learning communities is the University of Maryland-Baltimore County (UMBC), a mid-sized public research university between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. It has established eight such communities around themes ranging from emergency health services to the visual and performing arts. A new one for women interested in technology will be set up in the fall of 2004.

The 32 members of the 2-year-old Emergency Health Services Living-Learning Community, for example, live together on the first floor of Harbor Hall, enroll in courses together, form study groups and sponsor programs with guest speakers. The community sponsors the EMS Bike Team, a group of volunteers who provide first aid at athletic contests and other campus events.



Kim Leisey, director of residential education at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County (UMBC), chats with student leaders in Harbor Hall, the living quarters for members of UMBC's eight learning communities.

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The group's camaraderie has prompted members to describe the community as "a firehouse without a truck."

Bruce J. Walz, a faculty member involved with the community, credits it with helping a number of students stay in college, including a female student who had become homesick and a male who ran into some problems with the student judicial system.

Kim Leisey, director of residential education, says that UMBC is somewhat unusual in that particular academic departments have taken ownership of the university's living-learning communities. "As institutions of higher learning have become more complex, much of the informal learning and intellectual engagement that faculty and students used to have outside the classroom has been minimized," she said. "Lots of colleges and universities have special-interest housing, but our vision for housing at UMBC is to provide an environment that will also satisfy those who want to continue their intellectual curiosity with faculty outside the formal classroom setting."

UMBC also emphasizes the formation of study groups, both within the living-learning communities and for the student body as a whole. "My study group has been instrumental to my success here," said Lyndsay Beaulieu, a second-year mechanical engineering major from Calvert County, Md. "Spending time with friends sounds a lot better than 'locking myself in this room 'til I understand this.' In our group we keep each other going. Occasionally we tend to get on each other's nerves, but as soon as someone needs help with something, we're all there. That is retention to me. If I wanted to leave, my study group wouldn't let me."

Addressing retention issues early

Another important finding of research on student success is that the seeds of leaving college tend to be planted early. "It's a pretty good rule of thumb that you will lose half of the people you will lose – either physically or psychologically – by the end of the first semester," said Peter Ewell, an expert on higher education assessment and vice president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS). "Certainly you don't find a lot of people flunking out for academic reasons after the second year."

Jennifer Nichols, for example, nearly dropped out of Castleton State College in Castleton, Vt., during her first year for a variety of reasons, including financial and academic worries. "I was afraid of flunking out and ending up with a lot of loans that I would not be able to pay," she recalled. She found strong support from an adviser who helped her register for the right courses and who offered academic support when she did poorly on the initial tests in a theater course.

Nichols also got support from her roommate (who helped her learn her lines for the theater course) and from a weekly seminar called First-Year Studies. "The



Jennifer Nichols, a volunteer firefighter in Saxtons River, Vt., attends classes at nearby Castleton State College. Nichols, a first-generation student, credits the university's first-year program with keeping her in school.

seminar is run by a student, and you get to know a group of students really well," Nichols said. "We talked about topics like dating violence and alcohol."

The seminar Nichols took is typical of first-year programs that are now a fixture at hundreds of colleges and universities across the country. The best-known proponent of the strategic advantage of such programs is John Gardner, executive director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College in Brevard, N.C.

Gardner's interest in retention issues dates to 1970 when the anti-war protests turned into a riot on the campus of the University of South Carolina, where he was then teaching. "The president was profoundly disturbed by these events and felt that the rioters had not entered the university angry," he recalls. "So we began to re-engineer the freshman year to produce a new generation of students that would love the university. The goal was to produce happy campers, and we found that we kept them longer."

Gardner and his colleagues began with a program to train faculty and staff members to be more effective in understanding and working with students. The next step was to create a three-credit seminar for first-year students – dubbed University 101 – that took the form of an extended orientation program but also encouraged students to join clubs, engage in service and otherwise become engaged in the life of the university.

The seminar idea took on a life of its own and blossomed into a national movement called the Freshman Year Experience. The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition was established on the South Carolina campus, and in the two decades since, its conferences have drawn more than 90,000 persons.

In 2002, Gardner's new Policy Center at Brevard

"When our new students arrive in August, they have already begun forming a class and making connections."

— Associate Professor Stephen Braye, Elon University



Sandra Seidel (left), associate professor of biology at Elon University in North Carolina, meets with Megan Blaney, one of the first-year students in her "Elon 101" course. The

one-credit introductory course is just one aspect of the comprehensive approach Elon takes in helping students make a successful first-year transition.

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launched a National Survey of First-Year Academic Practices. That survey paints a comprehensive picture of policies and programs at 1,000 colleges throughout the country and allows individual institutions to compare their situation with national trends. The center also publishes a list of model first-year programs and is working to develop a set of standards – called Foundations of Excellence – for such programs.

A good example of a comprehensive first-year program is the First Year Experience at Elon University in Elon, N.C. The program kicks off well before students show up for classes with a spring orientation weekend in May and an optional experiential learning program during the summer. In the summer program, about 120 first-year students join returning students in activities that range from whitewater rafting to working for Habitat for Humanity. "When our new students arrive

in August, they have already begun forming a class and making connections," explained Stephen Braye, an associate professor of English.

Fall orientation begins with Move-In Day, an all-campus event in which faculty members quite literally help students lug their belongings from their cars to their new rooms.

Orientation includes social activities to help new students establish friendships, as well as small-group discussions of the honor code, coursework and academic goals. Both the spring and fall orientation programs include sessions for parents on how to

prepare their children to leave for college and how they can assist in the first-year adjustment.

Central to the university's approach to building high persistence rates is Elon 101, a one-credit course taught by a faculty member and an upperclassman. The course is taken by nearly all first-year students, who meet weekly in groups of about 15 during the first semester to discuss academic, social and personal concerns.

One recent Friday afternoon, Sandra Seidel, an associate professor of biology, met with her group of students who are interested in the health professions. She walked them through the procedures for registering for courses in the spring semester and helped Megan Blaney figure out how to construct her schedule. "I'm a golf player and have to keep afternoons free," explained Blaney, who is majoring in exercise and sport science.

"Science majors have their own set of problems," said

Seidel after the class. "If they are interested in med school or physical therapy, they need to keep in mind graduate school course requirements, as well as what it will take to get out of Elon." Sometimes Seidel is called on to help pre-med majors change programs after a painful encounter with first-semester chemistry. "One of my students is switching to business," said Seidel. "I helped her realize that there are plenty of business-related sciences. And I help students explain such decisions to their parents."

As part of Elon's system, each first-year minority student is paired with an upperclass student who serves as a mentor. Also, the first-year program features a low-key "early alert" system in which faculty members can notify counselors if a student misses classes or does poorly on early assignments.

University officials credit Elon's first-year program with a consistent rise in four-year graduation rates from 45 percent in 1989 to 69 percent for the most recent graduating class. The rise has been particularly dramatic among African-American students, whose retention rates nearly doubled – rising from 32 percent to 71 percent – during this period.

Students and faculty members alike note that Elon's approach involves multiple, even overlapping programs that share a common emphasis on building personal connections in the university community. "No one lives in his own tower," said Becky Olive-Taylor, associate director of the on-campus advising center.



Elon University President Leo Lambert talks with students outside one of the two on-campus centers where students and a faculty member live and take classes.

Targeting particular groups

Another widespread approach to bolstering retention grows out of research showing that particular groups of students are particularly vulnerable to dropping out. In 1998, when J. Herman Blake became director of the African American Studies Program and professor of sociology at Iowa State University in Ames, two out of every three African-American students who entered the university were failing to graduate. "So many of our black students came in with low self-esteem, almost with the attitude that they are not supposed to make it," he said. "They never really came to see themselves as scholars."

He noted that research by psychologist Claude Steele of Stanford University and others has shown a strong relationship between academic success and a positive self-image among students of color.

"As Steele implies, some of the things that are supposed to promote positive identity have the opposite effect," Blake said. "Students who come in wanting to hold on to their blackness develop negative thoughts about themselves that sometimes get in the way of their making the transition to seeing themselves as scholars. So our challenge is to raise their levels of self-esteem and to show them that they can have it all – higher education and the 'hood.'"

Blake initially assumed that providing black and



J. Herman Blake, director of the African American Studies Program and a professor of sociology at Iowa State University, talks with students David Romero and Nicole Edmond.

Latino faculty members as role models would excite students about what they could ultimately achieve. "But it did not work that way," he said. "The role models were seen as the exception, not the rule."

Instead, Blake's strategy was to "increase the academic rigor" of the curriculum through means such as longer reading lists. "When students are challenged in a respectful context, they rise – and some ask for even more," he said. He also spearheaded the creation of three student support groups:

- The Band of Brothers, which targets males, especially African-Americans.
- The Circle of Trust, which targets women.
- The A-Society, which focuses on scholarly topics as well as practical items such as study skills, resumé writing and internship opportunities. Once students develop self-confidence and the academic tools they need to succeed, Blake sends them out to help other students.

David Romero, a pre-med biology major, is originally from El Salvador.

He says that, without the support of the A-Society and related services, he probably would have broken under the pressures and dropped out of school. He now serves as a student coordinator in the program and describes his greatest challenge as reaching certain students. "Some just don't realize their potential," he laments. "It's a slow process."

The process of student support is also at work at Michigan State University. In 1988 officials at the East Lansing campus launched an eight-week residential

summer program for first-generation, low-income students who had shown resilience in overcoming societal difficulties. The program, known as the Summer University Program – Excellence Required (SUPER), offers coursework, tutorial sessions, self-appraisal skill development, and regular meetings with faculty and mentors. And it doesn't end when fall semester begins. Support continues into the first year on campus, and SUPER students are encouraged to remain in the same

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Iowa State students (from left) David Romero, Nicole Edmond, Clarrissa Taylor and Bradford Johnson know the value of peer support.

HIGHER GOAL SUPPLANTS HOOP DREAMS

As the first staff member of the African American Studies Program at Iowa State University, Donnell Bivens used what he learned during his own journey from aspiring professional athlete to graduate student and mentor to undergraduates.

A native of Chicago and a top high school basketball prospect, Bivens played at Iowa State and tried his hand at semi-professional basketball before deciding that big-time sports are a "meat market" where "coaches and teams have little regard for the players as people." With the encouragement of some faculty members, he enrolled in a master's degree program in educational leadership and policy studies. Still, he was unsure if the academic life suited him, and he lacked confidence in his ability as a public speaker.

J. Herman Blake, director of African American Studies, hired him as his assistant and instructed him to spend the first month shadowing him. "He told me to watch everything he did," recalled Bivens. "He told me to focus on his teaching style and how he communicated with others."

One day Blake's secretary told Bivens that Blake would not be coming to class and that he should take over. It was a terrifying experience – but one that he later came to appreciate. "It was like a gorilla was on my shoulder, and after it was over it stepped off," said Bivens. Blake's confidence in him changed the way he thought of his academics. "I began to see practical applications of the theories I learned in the classroom," he says. "It gave me confidence to speak in front of small and large groups."

As the African American Studies Program grew, Bivens was asked to lay the groundwork for the male support group that was to become the Band of Brothers. His goal was to stress academic excellence in a "down to earth" manner. "I wanted to get young guys in a room with African-American professors and administrators," he notes, adding that he realized the power of the real experiences and struggles of those who had been successful. "These students wanted to hear stories that made them think: 'Wow, that sounds like me.'"

As one who could talk about his own experiences

caring for his younger sister while his mother worked, Bivens was in a good position to help the young men of the Band of Brothers raise their personal expectations and excel. As he puts it, the group's mentoring initiatives "reinforce the fact that minority students are just as intelligent as the majority."

Bivens earned his graduate degree in late 2003 and left Iowa State to take a job as a counselor-adviser at Metropolitan College in New York City. During his last few weeks at Iowa State, he discussed his role in the formation of the Band of Brothers and the work that continues on the campus at Ames, Iowa.

Bivens said the Band of Brothers program addresses the negative self-perceptions that many black men bring to campus and provides the tools that many of them lack, such as study and networking skills. "We tell them to stand up straight, to say their names with confidence and to have pride in their work," said Bivens.

He recalled one young man who had been the valedictorian of his high school class, but could barely maintain a GPA of 2.5 at Iowa State. "He told me that his confidence level dropped immediately when he walked into classrooms of 100-plus white students who did not look like him," said Bivens. "He made assumptions that hindered his attitude and performance." In the program, such students are encouraged to get involved with study groups and to ask questions in class, even when they feel uncomfortable or unwelcome.

Bivens understands the challenges facing first-generation college students. "As much as your parents may want you to make it, they can't answer your questions," he said. "You have to ask very personal questions of strangers."

Likewise, he can empathize with student athletes even as he urges them not to place their hope in a sports career at the expense of their academic lives. "If you grow up in the ghetto and watch your mother struggle all your life, and someone comes along to offer you a contract that will allow her to never work again, you'll take it," he says. For such reasons, he added, "athletes are the hardest group to reach."



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dormitory where they began to help preserve the ties they built during the summer. SUPER participants currently receive free tuition, room, board and books, as well as a modest stipend.

Judy Tran, a current Michigan State student, praised the extensive support she received from the SUPER staff and her fellow students. "Before starting college I was afraid and very frustrated because I wasn't really positive about the idea of college and moving away from home," said Tran, who was a C student in high school but has become a B student at college.

"Being in a group with many other students from different backgrounds and being given all these great opportunities has opened me up to many things," Tran added. "SUPER gives me courage, motivates me to do well, and prevents me from falling into any type of failure."

Student Tecreshia Hoover agreed, saying: "My confidence level has skyrocketed while being a part of SUPER." She added, though, that she had to overcome the problem of being "labeled." "I was angry at first because some people said that the program was for 'dummies,' and I did not think that I was a dummy. Eventually, though, I figured that if they were offered the opportunity to learn about a huge campus prior to the regular school year, earn credits and meet new and important people on campus, they would do it, too."

Data show that, between 1995 and 2001, the average first-to-second-year retention rate for SUPER students

was 85 percent. That figure eclipses the 79 percent rate for non-SUPER students eligible for the program and compares favorably with the 87 percent figure for the university at large.

Similar successes have been achieved through a comparable effort in California – the Academic Advancement Program (AAP) at UCLA. The program grew out of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and now provides services to approximately 6,000 low-income students of all races, half of them Latino and 20 percent Asian. AAP includes a residential summer program, as well as coursework during the first year of college. Graduation rates for AAP students have risen by 30 percentage points since 1984 and now stand at about 80 percent.

Adolfo C. Bermeo, director of AAP since 1986, has moved the program away from its initial emphasis on remediation and what he termed "a survival mentality." Now it has shifted toward a "pedagogy of excellence" that pushes students to see themselves as scholars who are an integral part of the university community. "We stress taking ownership of their undergraduate experience," he said.

Bermeo has worked hard to educate senior administrators and faculty members about the program and its success with students who might generally be expected to be academic failures. "We publicize our data on graduation rates," he said. "All of this has shifted perceptions both about the program and about first-generation-college, low-income and underrepresented students."

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Gary Michael Tartakov, a professor of art and design at Iowa State, talks to students about what it takes to achieve academic success. His recent talk was one of a series of regular seminars designed to help students stay on track.

"When students are challenged in a respectful context, they rise — and some ask for even more."

— Professor J. Herman Blake, Iowa State University



Members of three student groups at Iowa State University — the A-Society, the Circle of Trust and the Band of Brothers — gathered with faculty members recently to discuss "Tips

for Academic Success." Among the group were (from left): Thuy Tran, David Romero, Bradford Johnson, Mutsa Chinoda and Clarrissa Taylor.

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Students with learning disabilities also are prone to self-image problems. At Vincennes University in southwest Indiana, the Student Transition into Educational Program (STEP) was launched in 1991 with the goal of achieving a 40 percent semester-to-semester retention rate for such students. It has far surpassed that goal – in fact, it has doubled the retention rate to 80 percent. The program serves about 100 students a semester by providing special academic courses and tutoring.

Jane Kavanaugh, a founder and co-director of the program, said that one of her main challenges is to confront the “learned dependence” and behavioral problems of learning-disabled students and the fact that for much of their lives they have been allowed to set relatively low standards for themselves. “If you raise the bar, they rise to the occasion,” she said. “When they arrive the first semester, they’re one kind of student; a few semesters later, they’re almost a different kind. The students almost change each other.”

First-year student Marla Cloud concurred. “STEP helped me realize that I can do it and that I’m not stupid,” she said. “It’s given me a little bit more courage to make something out of my life.”

The math/science barrier

High dropout rates have been a constant concern in some academic fields, most notably in science, engineering and math (SEM). “I’m concerned about the country’s engineering workforce,” said William A. Wulf, president of the National Academy of Engineering. “Numerically it’s down, and it’s increasingly composed of non-native-born individuals.”

Roughly half of the students who start out pursuing an engineering degree do not complete it, Wulf pointed out, citing that fact as a major factor in the shortage of U.S.-born engineers. “Engineering faculty members would like to think that they are flunking out the poor students,” he said. Yet many students who transfer out of SEM do well in other disciplines, so the blame for high attrition rates can’t all be laid on students. “If you ask students why they drop out of engineering,” Wulf said, “they will talk about things like poor teaching, poor advising and how infrequently they have seen an engineering professor.”

The University of Maryland-Baltimore County (UMBC) has embraced the challenge of raising persistence and graduation rates among SEM students by offering tutorial centers, peer counseling, group study and other support services. University President Freeman Hrabowski III, an African-American mathematician with a doctorate from the University of Illinois, is particularly concerned about encouraging students of color in these rigorous academic disciplines. He points to the university’s 15-year-old Meyerhoff Scholarship Program as a keystone in that effort.

Each year, the nationally noted program chooses 50 first-year students, most of them African-Americans, from among 1,500 applicants who plan to eventually earn Ph.D.s or M.D./Ph.D.s. The Meyerhoff Scholars receive financial support and begin their undergraduate studies with a six-week college-prep boot camp that includes coursework, cultural exploration and meetings with leaders in science and technology. During the next four years, students receive regular academic counseling; form study groups; take part in community service, internships and undergraduate research; and receive help from working professionals in planning their graduate study and future careers.

Compared to students who had qualified for the program but gone elsewhere, Meyerhoff Scholars have been twice as likely to graduate with an SEM degree and more than five times as likely to attend graduate school in these fields.

Hrabowski cites two keys to helping students succeed in the sciences: setting high expectations and emphasizing the importance of a strong work ethic. “In the humanities and social sciences, you can slack off for a while and still survive if you can think and write well,” he said. “But work in the sciences and mathematics is cumulative. If you get behind, it’s tough to catch up. We encourage students who get a C in a course such as introductory calculus to take the course over. If you get a C in Calculus 1, there is no way you are going to get a B or an A in Calculus 2.”

For students of color, Hrabowski says, it’s also important to create an environment where “it’s cool to be smart” through contacts with faculty members outside class and through interaction with competent and like-minded peers. “When most people see young black men walking across a campus, they think: ‘There goes the basketball team.’ We want them to think: ‘There goes the chemistry honors society,’” Hrabowski said.

Lamont Toliver, associate director of the Meyerhoff Scholarship Program, says that college presents a special challenge to students who are at the top of their high school classes but on campus find themselves among lots of bright people. “It can be a humbling experience,” he said. “But we have to help them realize that this is not rocket science. Succeeding is a matter of perseverance, tenacity and compassion more than anything else. We show them that they are part of a great team that will not let them fail. We tell them: ‘Your dreams are worthy of our support.’”



UMBC President Freeman Hrabowski III says he and his faculty work to create an environment where students of color feel “it’s cool to be smart.”

PINPOINTING THE LEAKS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION PIPELINE

State	Of 100 Ninth-graders, How Many...	Graduate from High School On Time?	Directly Enter College?	Are Still Enrolled Their Sophomore Year?	Graduate Within Six years?	Percent of Population 25-44 with Bachelor's Degree or Higher, 2000
Massachusetts	100	75	52	41	28	38.8
Iowa	100	83	54	37	28	25.0
Pennsylvania	100	75	46	36	27	26.7
New Hampshire	100	74	44	34	27	30.1
Rhode Island	100	70	46	37	26	28.5
Connecticut	100	77	48	37	26	34.9
Minnesota	100	84	53	38	25	31.7
New Jersey	100	86	55	40	24	34.1
North Dakota	100	84	58	42	24	26.4
Maine	100	77	42	31	23	23.5
Nebraska	100	84	50	38	22	27.6
Wisconsin	100	78	45	33	22	25.4
South Dakota	100	74	47	31	22	24.8
Kansas	100	74	50	32	22	28.9
Vermont	100	79	36	28	21	29.9
Indiana	100	68	41	30	21	22.1
Virginia	100	74	39	30	20	32.1
Delaware	100	61	36	28	19	27.7
Illinois	100	71	43	29	19	30.1
Missouri	100	73	39	27	18	25.0
New York	100	59	37	28	18	31.0
Colorado	100	71	37	26	18	34.1
Wyoming	100	75	39	NA	18	21.6
Michigan	100	69	40	28	18	24.2
North Carolina	100	59	38	28	18	25.4
Maryland	100	73	40	30	18	33.8
Ohio	100	70	39	28	17	24.2
California	100	69	33	22	17	26.7
Montana	100	78	42	28	17	25.5
Utah	100	84	32	21	16	25.8
Washington	100	71	32	22	16	28.5
West Virginia	100	75	39	27	15	16.6
Oregon	100	67	34	23	15	25.8
Florida	100	55	32	23	14	23.5
Arizona	100	59	30	18	14	23.4
South Carolina	100	51	34	23	14	21.8
Idaho	100	77	34	23	14	22.0
Tennessee	100	55	34	23	14	22.1
Alabama	100	59	34	23	13	21.3
Kentucky	100	66	39	25	13	19.4
Hawaii	100	64	38	22	13	27.3
Mississippi	100	56	36	23	13	17.8
Arkansas	100	74	39	26	12	18.2
Louisiana	100	56	33	22	12	19.8
Oklahoma	100	73	36	23	12	21.3
Georgia	100	52	32	21	12	26.9
New Mexico	100	60	36	22	11	21.2
Texas	100	62	32	19	11	24.0
Nevada	100	69	28	19	11	17.6
Alaska	100	62	28	NA	6	22.2
United States	100	67	38	26	18	26.7

Note: This information was originally published in the May 2003 issue of NCHEMS News and is used by permission from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. The issue is available online at: <http://www.nchems.org/News-May 2003/NCHEMS News May 2003.pdf>

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Looking ahead

We're all familiar with the stereotype from *The Paper Chase*: the stern college professor who tells his students on the first day of class: "Look to your left; look to your right. One of the three of you will not be here at the end of the term." Such warnings were variously interpreted as gimmicks to inspire serious effort or as dire statements of fact. Indeed, there was a time when rigorous courses were designed to "weed out" students who did not "belong" in a particular program – or even in higher education.

In the current climate, however, such drills are increasingly seen as ill conceived and inappropriate. For a variety of reasons – political, economic and ethical – colleges and universities are obligated not only to admit a wider range of students but also to ensure that the students they admit have realistic opportunities to succeed. Colleges and universities can no longer define success by the number of people they turn away or by the number of students they "weed out."

The programs described in the preceding pages demonstrate that colleges and universities are increasingly intentional and proactive in raising their retention and graduation rates. Betty Sanford of the SUPER program at Michigan State calls the approach "intrusive" – and makes no apology for that. When her students miss class, they are required to attend special study sessions. When there is a problem, she shows up personally at the student's dorm room. Freeman Hrabowski of UMBC adds, "Institutions that have improved retention rates tend to know their students well."

Eileen Kolman, the University of Notre Dame's dean of first-year studies, sees a return of the often-disparaged philosophy of institutions acting "in loco parentis." Her university hires 14 full-time professional advisers for new students, and Kolman communicates regularly with parents.

Kolman concedes that Notre Dame has much going for it – high admissions standards, a residential setting, a strong religious tradition – but adds that the university's 97 percent return rate for second-year students

(the nation's highest) is no accident. "We try to make the first year into a transition," she said.

At least two major insights have emerged from the experiences of colleges and universities that have taken a proactive or intrusive approach to student persistence. The first is the importance of providing students with what Vincent Tinto, chairman of the higher education program at Syracuse University, calls "powerful learning environments."

"There's been a shift from the conversation of 10 to 15 years ago," Tinto said. "If institutions are serious about student retention, they're going to have to move beyond marginal programs and services. They have to reshape the nature of the classroom experience, engage faculty with student affairs professionals and make systematic efforts to identify what sort of academic intervention programs lead to successful completion of college."

A second lesson is the need to make student success part of the campus culture. Students at Elon, Michigan State, Iowa State, UMBC and other institutions that have successfully addressed retention issues repeatedly make the point that, on their campuses, expectations are high, and they're backed up by strong support services – both formal and informal.

Colleges and universities with less-than-spectacular retention and persistence rates point out – correctly – that they are being called upon to educate large numbers and proportions of students who in the past would never have aspired to higher education. Moreover, like primary and secondary schools, they are being asked to educate masses of students to levels that in the past were deemed appropriate and necessary for relatively few.

Is that an explanation of mediocre graduation rates? Possibly. Is it a valid excuse? "Absolutely not," says Patrick Callan of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. "You have to educate the population you have. We should cut colleges and universities as much slack as the global economy will – which is none."

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P.O. Box 1806
Indianapolis, IN 46206-1806
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(Photo on Page 18 courtesy of Donnell Bivens.)

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Huffine Design

Production assistance:
Freedonia Studios

Printing:
Patented Printing

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— Lamont Toliver, University of Maryland-Baltimore County



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