**Achieving the Promise:**

**Promising Practices and Success Stories at Montgomery College**

**INTRODUCTION**

I have long believed—and often said—that the community college is the place where the American Dream becomes real. One person in a family getting a college degree can break the cycle of poverty—*just one person*!

With all that is happening in our nation regarding poverty, inequality, as well as the recent civil unrest that occurred in Baltimore—a mere 40 miles northeast of our Rockville Campus—we know in our hearts and minds that we have a moral obligation to do all we can to address the persistent and unfair inequalities that have long existed in so many aspects of our American life. Specifically, we have been called to a collective sense of urgency, to join together, and do all we can to eradicate the achievement gap and help our students *achieve the promise*, right here at Montgomery College.

We must. We shall. We will. And, in fact, in some noticeably significant ways, *we already have*. I offer to you that we are on our way with our compass pointed in the right direction.

Since September 2014, the Board of Trustees has collectively explored the myriad of aspects that comprise the achievement gap through my monthly *President's Focus* reports as well as in constituent conversations with the College Council and the four constituent councils—Faculty Council, Staff Council, Student Council, and the Administrator Council. We have examined this issue in a national context; we have studied and reviewed various data. We have looked at a range of social and public policies; and we have discussed and robustly debated many seemingly intractable complexities.

As a whole, however, our institution has been grappling with the achievement gap well before this academic year. I think it's fair to say that our focus and our work on these matters has, at times, been frustrating, difficult, and downright uncomfortable at certain junctures. Despite the very real challenges the achievement gap presents to our institution, I am so very proud of our collective commitment to address it, and to face some challenging truths and facts.

Perhaps more importantly, we haven't simply *talked* about the achievement gap. We have planned and *taken action* to do something about it. And together, we have already developed—and are in the beginning stages of implementing—both academic and programmatic changes that will help our students achieve the promise of higher education. These changes have already given rise to some promising, albeit early, tangible results.

This final *President's Focus* report of the academic year reviews our progress, examines where we are, and takes a glimpse at where the College is headed in our efforts to help our students achieve the promise.

***Back to Our Core Mission: Laying the Groundwork***
Montgomery College's mission states that, "We empower our students to change their lives, and we enrich the life of our community. We are accountable for our results." This mission

statement must ultimately hold true for *all* of the county's residents—not just a portion of them.

Unfortunately, data have long indicated that our African-American and Latino/Latina students' overall rate of academic success is lower than that of their peers. To address the difference, the *Montgomery College 2020* strategic plan envisioned the College developing, implementing, and securing resources to encourage meaningful student engagement opportunities and reduce the educational achievement gap for Latino/Latina and African-American students, with a particular focus on males, who have historically had lower achievement rates than females.

The foundation for excelling in this work was laid by two major organizational structural changes. First, in establishing the Student Services division in 2011, the College sharpened its focus on providing the vital services that bring students into Montgomery College and keep them engaged. With the tenets of the Common Student Experience serving as a guide, our Student Services division has strengthened our ability as an institution to focus on helping our students start smart and finish strong through systemic changes to counseling, advising, and other student services.

Secondly, our new collegewide academic structure, now in place for a full year, provides clarity of effort, actionable data, and—most importantly—focused leadership regarding student success in the classroom. We have always had excellent teaching and have great pride in our talented faculty. What we have now is a deeper institutional capability to approach and attain collective student success in a more effective and systemic fashion. Faculty, department chairs, and deans are already thinking about how to address student performance issues in new ways.

*College Groups Deliver Recommendations*

The College appointed two groups over the past few years to explore these issues in an inclusive manner. The first was a task force comprised of more than 80 faculty and staff from across the institution. This group produced a final report in 2013 that included a host of recommendations and strategies to provide all Montgomery College students an equal chance to attain their educational goals and complete their degrees. The second group, an implementation team composed of 30 employees, developed an implementation plan in 2014. The leadership of the College reviewed these recommendations and requested the necessary funding to implement many of the ideas.

*The Gap Redefined: Achieving the Promise*

Closing the achievement gap has been one of my priorities since I came to Montgomery College nearly five years ago. In fact, the phrase itself has been an important part of our working vocabulary. It has been very useful when talking to people at other institutions about strategies. The truth is that I have been uncomfortable with the language we use to talk about gaps in achievement.

As I said in my State of the College address last month, the oft-repeated phrase, "closing the achievement gap…closing the achievement gap…," has just not felt right to me. We need to be talking about the *promise* that our students have and how we are going to invest in and develop that promise. We want all of our students to be enabled to focus on *achieving* their own potential and promise. However, when we talk about "the gap," we focus on a deficit.

With our deeper understanding of the problem and challenges, we are changing our language at the College. We understand the historical circumstances that got us here, and we are using that knowledge to take action. However, we are changing the "gap" terminology—that is, a deficit view—to "promise," specifically *achieving the promise*. Montgomery College has an opportunity to change the discourse both within our institution as well as across higher

education. Some people may think this is simply a matter of semantics. Perhaps it is. But the linguist in me believes that words convey many things—intended or otherwise—and the weight and reverberation of certain words can, sadly, quash hopes and dreams.

I stand ever more ready and committed to helping every student achieve the promise of higher education, no matter their racial or socioeconomic background. In the following sections, I look at (1) curricular redesign efforts, (2) flexibility that produces positive change, (3) mentoring programs, and (4) efforts to increase access. By redesigning certain curricula, adopting a more robust and proactive academic program advising model, enhancing mentoring opportunities, and fostering greater inclusiveness and access, Montgomery College is committed to evolving into an institution in which every student has the opportunity to thrive.

### FIRST FOCUS: REDESIGNING CURRICULA TO REMOVE BARRIERS

We end the 2014–2015 academic year on the cusp of implementing a comprehensive student achievement plan, anchored by greater coordination and deeper faculty and staff participation throughout our academic and student services units. The College has undertaken two major curriculum changes to enrich the academic experience for a broad range of students.

*General Studies*

We have redesigned our general studies degree program—by far, the program with the largest student enrollment. Starting with the academic year 2015–2016, students will receive deliberate, one-on-one advising from their program professors. Essentially, we will leverage the relationship built between student and teacher in the classroom to do all we can to get "in the faces" of our students. This proactive advising approach will initiate a greater level of contact with students and offer struggling students a greater sense of connection and engagement with the College and within their program of study.

Some faculty members who teach general studies courses are teaming up to create mini learning communities between paired courses. Their students will take these classes with the same group of students, creating a sub-community within the program. Through these connections, these students will ultimately become their own support system and work collaboratively to help each other move through the program and overcome obstacles. Research demonstrates that students who participate in learning communities and cohort-style courses and programs have greater success rates and outcomes.

These strategies have proven to increase retention and completion among African-American and Latino/Latina students in particular. In my view, the most promising and transformational of the strategies is our commitment to becoming an institution that is more active and proactive in the lives of our students. In fact, our collegewide honors programs have long been proactive in terms of academic advising, an approach that has helped honors students get into and stay in honors programs. These students are richly diverse in many ways and have been able to overcome many daunting obstacles due to the support of their classmates and the close interaction and coaching that is provided by their program coordinators. This is an effective strategy that we can grow and implement institutionally.

*Developmental Education*

The math, English, and reading areas have made several refinements to developmental education in experimenting with new methods that may more accurately place students in proper classes when they first arrive at the College. We have piloted alternative placement methods that include individual transcript reviews rather than solely relying on ACCUPLACER placement test scores. By combining developmental reading and writing courses, we will also significantly help improve student progression.

We expect that these alterations to the way that we deliver on our fundamental mission will ultimately make Montgomery College more accessible to low-income students as well as

first-generation college students, and better serve all students. The changes have been well-timed, concurrent with faculty efforts to design a new general education model that will allow students to move through their general education requirements in more clearly designated pathways—or cores—that will make their educational experience more coherent, consistent, and relevant.

Our renewed focus on curriculum will have a serious and long-lasting impact on our *at-promise* students (a term less common than the more familiar, but deficit term, "at-risk") and help remove many of the barriers they face. The facts are simple—strong relationships with professors and close relationships with fellow classmates help at-promise students stay in school and earn their degrees. We will do everything we can as an institution to give them the support and encouragement they need and deserve.

### SECOND FOCUS: GREATER FLEXIBILITY

Educators can make a marked difference when they embrace flexible teaching styles and use the wealth of diversity in the classroom as an *asset* rather than an *obstacle*. As such, the College has reaffirmed its focus on global education. The Global Humanities Institute (GHI) has had great success in globalizing the curriculum in ways that both broaden and diversify the content of classroom instruction, thereby making the experience more relevant to our students who come from widely varied origins. For example, as part of her GHI faculty fellowship, English professor Joan Naake rejected the standard anthology of Western literature when preparing for her Introduction to Literature course. Instead, she converted the curriculum into a collection of literary works by authors from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and South Africa in addition to the canon of British and American works. In doing so, she infused the course with a diversity of information that was relatable and relevant to students of widely varied origins.

Our flexibility also extends to the very manner of how we deliver education. Starting in the 2015–2016 academic year, the College will offer its first fully-online degree programs in information systems and business. We are also reviewing other degree programs that may be appropriate for online teaching and learning in the near future. Further, various academic units regularly add new online courses to promote maximum accessibility to students. The units have also worked to keep students' costs down by increasing the use of common textbooks across disciplines as well as adopting free open educational resources (OERs).

## THIRD FOCUS: ENHANCED MENTORING

We know from study after study that students of color perform better when they join together and have access to specific programs designed to provide additional educational resources, and in some circumstances, support for their common experiences. Several promising mentoring programs at Montgomery College are yielding impressive results.

### Boys to Men

Our Boys to Men program has served nearly 400 Black male students since its inception in 2008. The program seeks to: (1) keep Black male students enrolled; (2) raise their GPA; and (3) ensure that they earn a degree or certificate or meet the requirements to transfer. The mentoring group meets biweekly throughout the semester and each meeting focuses on a specific theme that can range from study habits and time management to domestic violence. One meeting focused on how fathers can help reduce infant mortality. A participant indicated that he used that important information to assist the mother of his child during her pregnancy.

Ultimately, the Boys to Men program fosters relationships among participants and helps each individual see himself as a valued resource to others in the program—and beyond. Our most recent data indicate that 43 of the 48 students recently participating in the program graduated, transferred, or returned to Montgomery College for another semester. If we identify the

necessary resources, we will increase the number of coordinators to reach more students.

### *Sister 2 Sister*

Sister 2 Sister is a similar program that promotes academic success and personal enrichment for Montgomery College's first-semester African-American women. On a monthly basis, participants are exposed to educational, career, and networking opportunities as well as supplemental academic support. In addition to receiving advice about academic success specifically tailored to their needs and experience, the participants visit local high schools to inspire Black female high school students to pursue a college education. This program served more than 1,500 students in 2014 and plans are to increase the number of program coordinators when the necessary resources are identified.

### *Combat2College*

The Combat2College program welcomes veterans and provides them with academic and social opportunities as well as appropriate support services. The program, established in 2008, creates a welcoming environment for veterans and service members who are transitioning into college, while adapting the skills they developed from military training and combat experience to facilitate a successful college experience. With a foundation of respect, appreciation, and inclusiveness, the program gives veteran students space to discuss and deal with common experiences, fosters social outings, and provides academic advising and mental health counseling when needed. In the fall of 2014, nearly 100 veterans accessed the services provided by Combat2College.

### FOURTH FOCUS: IMPROVING ACCESS

It is clear to me that our county's economic future requires strong investment in a "Kindergarten-to-Job" educational system. Access to higher education is key because our county's future demands that everyone—regardless of race or socioeconomic status—has a

chance to get a firm grasp on the ladder of opportunity. That first rung on the ladder, for many in our community, is Montgomery College.

*Achieving Collegiate Excellence and Success*

Our Achieving Collegiate Excellence and Success program—ACES—has been important and successful in providing a ladder for so many students who might not have considered going to college. It is making access to college a reality for hundreds of at-promise students. Established in 2012, the program has served 1,500 students by physically being present in select high schools where ACES coaches can identify students who have the desire and capacity for higher education, and who would benefit from targeted support and guidance. In the program, students build the skills and confidence they need to be college-ready in order to eventually complete a bachelor's degree. By targeting students who might otherwise not think about college as a possibility, ACES is already hard at work doing its part to help at-promise students achieve the promise.

Preliminary survey data have indicated strong support by ACES students for the program. Nearly all (98 percent) of ACES students applied to a two- or four-year college or university, and there were strong positive statements by the students regarding the effectiveness of ACES: 99 percent would recommend it to a friend; 99 percent stated the ACES coach provided helpful information and guidance; and 96 percent stated that ACES participation was important to achieving their goals.

*Financial Aid*

We know that the cost of higher education is too often the highest barrier to student enrollment and retention. That's why the Office of Enrollment Services and Financial Aid will continue to play a key role in achieving the promise. Frankly, no student should be restricted from attending Montgomery College because of limited financial resources. In academic year 2013–2014, our Financial Aid Office awarded nearly $70 million in financial

grants and loans to more than 18,000 students. The number of students who do not qualify to apply for federal and state financial aid is increasing and we must continue to research scholarship resources for these students. The efforts of the Montgomery College Foundation to provide additional scholarships have also been instrumental in helping the College meet our mission of access. The foundation saw a 60-percent increase in online applications for scholarships from 2013 to 2014.

Undoubtedly, the Financial Aid Office serves a large number of low-income students and provides extensive outreach services throughout the county. Its staff members are diverse and multilingual and are committed to helping low-income applicants access higher education. Staff members also help students take ownership of their financial aid process by providing them with critical information and tools necessary to boost their confidence and take responsibility as they progress in their education. To meet the myriad of needs of the very diverse student population we serve, our Financial Aid Office routinely holds informational seminars for culturally diverse populations. The office also interfaces with local high schools that have large low-income student populations and provides one-on-one financial aid advising to assist students with completion of financial aid forms, particularly students with unique situations.

In academic year 2013–2014, 75 percent of federal Pell grant recipients were African-American, Hispanic, or multi-race students. The number of Hispanic Pell-grant recipients grew the fastest over the past five years, increasing by 64 percent. African-American Pell-grant recipients have shown the second highest level of growth over five years at 37 percent. Another important indicator of the growth in need is that the number of low-income students receiving aid has increased each year over the past six years. In academic year 2008–2009, 30 percent of students received some form of financial aid; in academic year 2013–2014, financial aid recipients increased to 52 percent.

My jaw often drops when I think about the fact that financial aid applications at Montgomery College have increased more than 70 percent since 2009. Clearly, our Financial Aid Office will continue to be a key driver in our effort to help all students achieve the promise.

### *Grant Programs*

The College encourages enrollment and retention of underrepresented groups by consistently using research-supported strategies, including summer bridge programs, proactive academic support, mentoring, cohort building, and internship/research experiences. We engage underrepresented groups to create interest in college even before matriculation. Our strong partnership with Montgomery County Public Schools helps to identify and address gaps in preparation, and to pique interest in certain fields of study by bringing students to the College's campuses and placing faculty in the high schools to teach courses to students in their own environment. These efforts engage students of color, low-income, and would-be first-generation college students to promote a more seamless passage from high school to college.

Over the past five years, we obtained more than $2 million in access-oriented grants to implement these strategies more broadly. Our *Graduate Transfer STEM Talent Expansion Program*, funded by a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant, provides incoming freshmen with a summer bridge program to prepare them for their mathematics and science coursework and to offer academic support through faculty-led tutoring, study groups, and on- and off-campus STEM research experiences. Another NSF-funded grant spurred our *On RAMP to STEM* S-STEM program, which provides full scholarships to cohorts of students to focus on interdisciplinary approaches to the life sciences to understand and apply quantitative approaches to life science research.

We have successfully run two access-oriented programs funded through the US Department of Education. The Project Portal to Success in Engineering Program, which is funded through

the agency's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant, specifically targets women and minority students to succeed in the engineering field. In addition, the federal TRIO Program provides free academic, career, financial, personal, social, and technological assistance and support to eligible college students. The purpose of the TRIO Program is to increase retention, graduation, and transfer rates by providing and coordinating various educational support services to help students adjust to college life, achieve academic success, graduate, and move on to become contributing members of society.

Many of these grant programs serve underrepresented student populations and use strategies—scholarships, one-on-one mentoring, tutoring, articulation, enrollment and registration guidance, and connections with professionals in the field—known to increase success rates of African-American and Latino/Latina students. Grants are excellent catalysts that stimulate innovation at the College and encourage faculty and staff to try something new. When these efforts are successful and the grant funding concludes, we then need to decide how to systematically incorporate the work into the mainstream of the College, either through additional grants or operating budget funding.

## PROMISING PRACTICES ON THE HORIZON

Clearly, we are making some good progress on fundamentally retooling our operations and processes as we work to successfully carry out our mission, and to make our work more relevant and valuable for our at-promise students. We are not done yet. We have many more action items on the horizon that will surely light our path on this fundamental social justice mission of equalizing access to higher education and ensuring student success.

*Data Collection and Analysis*

As I mentioned in last month's *President's Focus*, we have begun collecting data and posting it publicly. Until we *know* our data, we cannot *change* our data. To that end, we have established a Student Success Score Card that will track student enrollment, progress,

achievement, and completion. Interestingly, the data collected from something as fundamental as our gateway courses—which are early, and often demanding, college-level courses needed by many students—may, in fact, tell us that some gateway courses are too high a hurdle for some students. If this is the case, we may consider alternatives to those offerings.

We will track how long it takes for students to complete different programs and how many credits they compile as they work toward graduation. We will disaggregate data by race, gender, age, and other variables to help us understand patterns of achievement. We'll be doing this for certificates, associate degrees, and transfer students because achievement is a collegewide goal. We will do this because each one of our populations deserves an opportunity to achieve its promise, and, when we know the data, we better understand the nuances of each group. These measures are designed to give us *actionable information.* We want to be able to look at how different groups of students are faring on average, and where adjustments in pedagogy or mentoring may need to occur. If we are serious about moving our students in the right direction, we will document it boldly and publicly. We will use the data to systematically measure our progress toward this goal.

The Academic Affairs division has been working closely with the Office of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness to drill down into completion data to determine how students are performing in specific academic programs. Beginning with the 16 academic programs with the highest enrollment, the Academic Affairs division is setting five-year goals to increase program graduation and transfer rates as much as 25 percent by 2020 through reasonable enrollment growth, targeted retention efforts, and persistent student engagement. We intend to decrease cost-for-degree and time-to-degree by expanding the use of or developing free open educational resources and common textbooks where possible, by adding more online course options, and by coordinating course schedules collegewide. We will give our students optimal chances to progress into four-year programs or jobs by aligning program curricula with transfer programs and critical industry needs.

By understanding graduation, transfer, and retention rates at this level of detail, deans, department chairs, and faculty will have the ability to analyze the effectiveness of their programs and make needed changes that will improve completion. Data will be broken down by demography to provide a clear, descriptive picture of how each population of students is progressing through the programs. For student groups, or individual students, who are not advancing as far or as fast as the larger group, deans, chairs, and faculty will be able to intervene by providing special support to help those students progress. This is the type of student-centered engagement that we need to effect real change in the success rates of groups that are completing at lower rates.

We are going to own this process instead of waiting for someone else to own it. Whether it be our local legislators, our state or federal regulatory agencies, and/or our regional accreditor and other certifying agencies, accountability using data is not going away. We must get out in front of it rather than be flattened by it.

### *Continuous Student Involvement*

As we work to develop initiatives that will help every student no matter what their racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic background, who better to ask for ideas than students themselves? Established in 2014, the Student Campaign's Design Challenge is a series of facilitated workshops on each campus that invite students to develop ideas that will help everyone achieve the promise of higher education. To date, more than 60 students of diverse backgrounds have participated.

The students were asked to design peer-mentoring programs from the ground up that help students empower each other to succeed. In sharing their ideas, students noted that not all students seek mentoring for the same reasons. Mentoring needs can vary from academic performance improvement, to assistance navigating college life, to getting involved in campus

activities, and to finding internships or work opportunities. Any successful peer-mentoring program must take these differing needs and expectations into account.

### *Student Engagement within Academic Programs*

This past academic year, the Academic Affairs division designed program-level engagement strategies to weave students into the fabric of their chosen programs and provide deliberate, proactive advising directly from their program faculty members. Along with data tracking, students will begin regular interactions with their deans and program faculty and staff as soon as they select a major. Beginning this summer, students will receive welcome letters from their deans, attend program-specific orientations, and be invited to monthly events with their classmates to socialize, build community, and network with alumni, faculty, and professionals in the field. These engagement strategies are designed to reflect and encourage cultural competency and diversity.

## CONCLUSION

On behalf of the entire leadership team at Montgomery College, I want to thank the members of the Board of Trustees for their thoughtful examination of these complex issues. I thank everyone in the College community for the willingness to engage in these challenging issues to help us develop the most promising practices and programs to move our institution into the 21st century and beyond. This has been a most productive year in terms of refining our instructional services and our operations in ways that will help all of our students achieve the promise of higher education. In this effort, each of us is called to do this social justice work and I am so very proud of where we are—and where we are going—on this important path.

### Discussion Questions

1. What information stands out for you in this report?
2. What do you think is the most promising practice happening at Montgomery College?
3. What other things might we consider to help our students achieve the promise?